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New Year Shocker: NGOs see red over AIDS control body's cost-cutting measures

# New Year Shocker: NGOs see red over AIDS control body's cost-cutting measures



Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society's order states: 'Starting January 1, cut down gatherings, IEC activity, street plays aimed at HIV prevention' .

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People working in the field of HIV prevention had hoped for a fresh start this year, considering last year, they were hit by fund paucity, shortage of condoms, lack of testing kits and no salaries.

THE NEW year began on a grim note for 179 NGOs as a terse circular from the

Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society (MSACS) directed the activists to suspend 'targeted intervention' activities related to HIV prevention.

People working in the field of HIV prevention had hoped for a fresh start this year, considering last year, they were hit by fund paucity, shortage of condoms, lack of testing kits and no salaries.

"Already, several activities have been stopped such as health camps as there are no testing kits," said Kalyani Patil, Pune district programme officer of MSACS.

However, despite the slowdown in activities, NGOs were optimistic of some assurance from the state. "Instead, on the last day of 2015, at 5.30 pm, a mail was sent out to all the NGOs by Pravin Sonawane, Deputy Director (TI-NGO), MSACS, directing them to suspend Targeted Intervention (TI) activities from January 1, 2016," Meena Seshu, general secretary of Sangram — (Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha), an NGO working in the field of HIV prevention which had also set up VAMP (Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad) a sex workers' collective, told The Indian Express (<http://indianexpress.com/>).

The mail on December 31 was also followed by another e-mail on January 4 that sought to "clarify" that strategies like "community-based activity" should be suspended.

"This is laughable. If we do not work in the community, then whom should we work with?," asks Seshu as she plans to take up the issue at the public hearing planned by the National Human Rights Commission and Jan Arogya Abhiyaan on January 6 and 7 in Mumbai.

In Pune district, there are 16 NGOs authorised by MSACS to provide targeted interventions. Since April last year, the NGOs had not received funds to pay salaries and the first installment was given in September. By then, a few had stopped their activities and shut shop. "But we cannot do that. There are more than 1,000 female sex workers that we reach out to at Budhwar Peth. These women will stop going to clinics, if we do not convince them to undergo HIV tests," says Seema Waghmode, coordinator of Kayakalp — an NGO based in Budhwar Peth.



“On an average every month 30,000 people undergo HIV tests at 44 Integrated Counselling and Testing Centres (ICTCs) set up at Pune district. Now, with the fund crisis, the number of people attending the centre has dropped with 24,000 undergoing the test each month,” Patil said. Out of 130 government posts, a total of 30 are vacant out of which, 16 posts of ICTC counsellors are yet to be filled.

When contacted, Avsharan Kaur, Joint Director (TI) MSACS, however, denied that outreach services, related to HIV prevention, had been affected. “All we are saying is stop the huge gatherings, dinners and mega activities planned in the name of HIV prevention. At least for a while, street plays and Information Education and Communication activities should be stopped as there has been a delay in receiving funds from National Aids Control Organisation. We are trying our best to tide over the crisis as National Health Mission (NHM) has also given funds to the MSACS programme,” Kaur told The Indian Express.

Meanwhile, experts at the National AIDS Research Institute (NARI), when contacted, pointed out that NGOs implementing targeted interventions play a critical role as the new goal is to achieve zero new infections and end AIDS by 2030.



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