

# BRIDGING THE GAPS

Health and rights for key populations

## Methadone saved us!



**Sharifbek Safarov** (on the left) is a 54 years old man. He is a master of sports in national wrestling, a six-time champion of Tajikistan, a candidate for master of sports in judo. He worked as a coach for many years. Difficult economic situation in the country, lack of stability in times of civil war (1992-1997) and drugs that flowed from neighboring Afghanistan contributed to the fact that many young men, including Sharifbek, started using heroin.

*"Half kilo of opium was offered just for a pair of galoshes,"* recalling Sharifbek.

In June 2014, Sharifbek met with the outreach worker of AFEW -Tajikistan. Sharifbek passed HIV test, underwent a medical examination in an anti-tuberculosis hospital and was offered to join the opioid substitution therapy program.

Thanks to the opioid substitution therapy program and the support of social workers, Sharifbekov returned to his favorite job. Today he has about 70 teenagers-trainees in his section. He receives a salary from the Government. Sharifbek gradually decreases a methadone dosage. Having a diploma from a sports college, Sharifbek, despite his age, wants to get a diploma from a teacher training institute.

Together with his fellow **Bobokhuja Badridinov** (on the right), who is also a client of the opioid substitution therapy program, they often come to AFEW for group meetings with active drug users, who talk about the benefits of substitution therapy and personal experience of positive changes in their lives.

*"Methadone really saved us. We can work, feed our families. There is no more need to look for drugs, which means health risks and problems with the law are reduced."*

Main activities of the AFEW office in Khatlon region are social support to vulnerable groups, prevention of infection transmission in detention institutions, support to PLHIV in access and adherence to treatment, and awareness raising among the law enforcement personnel on HIV-

related issues. In 2015, due to the work and hard efforts of AFEW, Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population of Tajikistan gave its authorization for pre-test counseling and rapid HIV testing to be conducted in public organizations