

**Testimony of Ambassador John M. O’Keefe  
Executive Director, Open World Leadership Center  
Before the  
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate**

Chairman Shaheen, Senator Hoeven, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the Open World Leadership Center.

**Overview**

The Open World Leadership Center has focused on responding to the priorities of Congress since its inception in 1999. It does this by producing an exchange program that establishes lasting relationships between the emerging leaders of Open World countries while engaging Americans committed to sharing values and practices that lead to stable countries accountable to their citizens. In this capacity, Open World is assisting Congress in its oversight responsibilities and in inter-parliamentary and legislative activities, while supporting international projects and partnerships of American citizens in all fifty states.

The Open World program was designed to bring emerging federal and regional political leaders to the United States to meet their American counterparts and gain firsthand knowledge of how American civil society works. Program participants experience American political life and witness democracy in action, from debates in local city councils to the workings of the United States Congress. This hands-on and close up look at our processes – and the people who run them – has a unique impact on our delegates. The Open World experience provides the impetus for improvement; delegates return home and set to work creating change based on the models they have seen.

Over the years, Open World’s focus has expanded beyond the former Soviet states over the years. Today, Open World operates in sixteen countries and has brought over 20,000 rising leaders to engage with Congress, other governmental officials, and their American counterparts in professional exchanges in more than 2,100 American communities across the country.

There has never been a more important time to forge connections with rising leaders across the Central Europe and Eurasia. Open World reaches out to the next generation of Russia’s well-educated youth who eagerly take in what they see in the United States – the ability to innovate, a chance to profit from your own ideas, a transparent form of government, and a rule of law that protects individuals. They are the future of Russia and we have an incalculable opportunity to introduce them to the everyday practices of good governance and the rule of law. In equal measure, we must support the rising generation of leaders in countries bordering the Russian Federation, particularly areas where there are mixed ethnicities, like eastern Ukraine, Georgia, northwest Kazakhstan and elsewhere.

As significant changes occur in the region, Open World stands poised to increase our presence in Ukraine in response to Congressional priorities. We are closely coordinating plans for Ukrainian programming with key State Department officials, including Ambassador Pyatt and his team at the embassy to determine how best to help the fledgling government in this critical time. Ambassador Pyatt recently noted, “As I travel around Ukraine, I frequently meet Open World Alumni and have been impressed by the breadth of the program and its ability to build relationships with young professionals at the local level. ...[M]any Open World alumni have been excellent partners to the Embassy in terms of implementing civic-minded initiatives in their communities.”

## **Open World Program**

The Open World Leadership Center is an asset for Congress, directly connecting Members to rising leaders in an evolving region and to the American constituents who host these delegates. Open World’s extensive leadership networks abroad and hosting network in the United States is a resource for members of Congress seeking new partnerships with young political, civic and community leaders from here and abroad. An investment in Open World is an investment in America’s future security.

### **Open World is designed to enable emerging young leaders to:**

- engage with government, business, volunteer, and community leaders carrying out their daily responsibilities;
- experience how the separation of powers, checks and balances, freedom of the press, and other key elements of America’s democratic system make the government more accountable and transparent;
- develop an understanding of the American market-based economy;
- learn how American citizens organize and take initiative to address social and civic needs;
- participate in American family and community activities; and
- establish lasting professional and personal ties with their American hosts and counterparts.

Because Open World provides such high-caliber programs, participants return home with a tangible appreciation of America’s democracy and market economy. The impact of the 10-day program with home stays in the United States, a keystone of the Open World model, is multiplied by continued post-visit communication between participants and their American hosts, their fellow Open World alumni, and alumni of other United States Government-sponsored exchange programs. Open World has also frequently facilitated communication between Open World alumni and visiting officials wishing to have an unfiltered dialogue of current issues.

## **Open World Strategic Goals**

Open World sets strategic goals that reflect the interests of Congress and their constituents, and meets these goals.

- Reaching a new generation of leaders –

Open World selects the most promising of the next generation of rising leaders in our participating countries. After their time in the United States, these young leaders maintain contact with each other and their American counterparts through social media groups set up by Open World. Building on the success of the exchanges, Open World assembled an American advisory committee consisting of young professionals with extensive experience in Open World countries to consult on program agendas, alumni engagement, and administer post-program surveys.

- ‘30 Under 30’ –

In 2012 Open World set a goal of having 30 percent of its delegates be aged 30 or younger: In 2013, 35 percent of delegates were 30 or younger at the time of their program. These young professionals studied themes as: innovation in higher education, NGO development, journalism, social entrepreneurship, and information technology. In November 2013 for example, Open World partner, the Center for Safe Energy (CSE), hosted a delegation of young Russian social entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. In coordination with Open World’s Young Professional Advisory Committee, CSE created a program designed to maximize benefits for both the Russian visitors and their American counterparts. Outcomes from this unique program include several projects delegates have planned as a result of their trip: a free legal clinic in Moscow based on a visit to Berkeley’s Boat Law School, and future academic exchanges with San Francisco’s Peer Health Exchange for training teachers to instruct and provide guidance about pressing social issues.

### **Open World responds to Congressional interests and Member requests to begin exchange programs for leaders in countries new for Open World:**

Mongolia – At the request of Co-chairs for the House Mongolia Caucus in 2013, three Mongolian judicial delegations arrived to observe American court systems, and learned about systems, such as probation, that do not exist in Mongolia. Following an exchange, one delegate joined a working group to establish procedures for a new trial system in Mongolia, noting that the information gleaned from his visit to Los Angeles will be invaluable to that work. Other delegates from rural areas of the country made plans to implement both mediation and probation systems in their home courts.

Kosovo – The Board approved a request from the Co-Chairs of the House Albanian Issues Caucus to initiate Open World hosting for Kosovo National Assembly Members and staff as part of an effort to promote integration with the European Union and NATO. Earlier this year,

Chairman Eliot Engel met with one of the first delegations from Kosovo, which was hosted by Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, NY. As a result of the trip, faculty and administrators from the Mercy Community will visit Kosovo later this year to develop a partnership, including a student exchange program, with a university in Pristina.

### **Open World links Members of Congress to rising Eurasian leaders and their American hosts.**

In 2013, there were 190 meetings between Members of Congress or their staff and Open World delegations. Over 70 percent of 2013 Open World delegations took part in such meetings, many of which were arranged and attended by our active constituent hosts.

Recently, Senator Boozman met with a delegation of youth legislators from Russia. Before the Senator arrived, the delegates were impressed even with their ability to access the Senate office buildings and to speak with senior aides to the Senator. That the Senator would sit down to speak with them at length about accountable governance and the importance of personal relationships in grassroots democracy profoundly impacted the delegates.

Since its inception, Open World has supported hundreds of partnerships and long-term projects between constituents and Open World delegates and was instrumental in the establishment of several others. Over 90 communities in the United States have developed or furthered partnerships and joint activities with regions/communities in Open World countries, including some 20 court-to-court partnerships. Local chapters of Rotary International, Friendship Force, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation and other Open World grantees have partnerships in several Open World countries. In 2013, Open World hosted delegations linked to 39 partnerships with American organizations, for example:

- U.S. District Judge Richard Bennett led efforts to reinvigorate the sister-city relationship between Baltimore and the port city of Odessa, Ukraine. In April 2013, a delegation of judges, law professors and a judicial clerk formed the third specialized rule of law delegation from Ukraine to have programming in Baltimore and the greater area in order to foster the growing ties between these sister cities. According to the program facilitator, the program changed the perception of the words freedom and democracy for the delegation. The delegates indicated that “you can feel freedom even in the air” in Maryland. This program followed the visit of a high-level judicial delegation to Odessa of Open World hosts from Maryland that occurred in 2012. Open World has long been instrumental in supporting the sister city partnership between Kharkiv, Ukraine and Cincinnati, OH. In 2013, five mayors from the Kharkiv region of Ukraine paid their own way to Cincinnati with an Open World alumnus in order to build on the partnership. One of the visiting mayors credits his visit to the United Way office, Wyoming High School, and the Drop Inn Center in Cincinnati with inspiring him to get students involved in volunteer work for the homeless in Kharkiv.

- A long dormant Cleveland-Volgograd (Russia) partnership was reinvigorated by Open World in 2012. Since then delegations of legislators, doctors, women leaders, and judges have visited the Cleveland area.
- Open World's first Kosovo delegation supported a newly formed Iowa-Kosovo sister state relationship, which in turn arose from a National Guard partnership with Kosovo. An Open World delegation studying economic development went to Des Moines in January 2014, and delegates were interested in the community college model for providing additional training to high school graduates.
- The Greater Portland – Russian Sister City Project (The Archangel Committee) of Portland, Maine celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013. Ambassador O'Keefe attended the anniversary event which included the vice-mayor of Archangelsk and the Governor of Maine, among others. Over the years, the Archangel Committee has hosted 17 Open World delegations, and was one of our very first grantees. Their warm, professional hospitality and excellent professional programming have resulted in long term friendships and professional ties with the people and government administration of Arkhangelsk.
- While many partnerships are institutional, some are personal. One local host, a small business development expert from the University of Wisconsin, has been hosting Kazakh delegates for the past five years and has developed collaborative partnerships with several of the delegates he has met. He has travelled to Kazakhstan several times, most recently last month, to continue previous work (with a delegate from 2010) on the development of Rural Business Centers, to network with past Wisconsin Open World alumni and to continue to build collaborative opportunities for future projects and efforts.

**Most importantly, Open World Alumni return home and initiate projects that contribute to democratization efforts in their countries:**

- At the request of the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, Open World in September 2011 hosted Ukrainian parliamentarian Olesia Orobets, the forward-looking chair of an education subcommittee. During her visit, Deputy Orobets had a peer-to-peer conversation with Congressional Ukrainian Caucus Co-chair Rep. Marcy Kaptur (OH) about economic development, current affairs, and representative government. A meeting with Lawrence R. Silverman, special advisor to the Vice President for Europe and Eurasia, and National Security Council and State Department staff focused on Deputy Orobets's efforts to make the Ukrainian government more accountable to its citizens. As a pioneer in using social media to communicate with the Ukrainian electorate, the visiting deputy also benefited from meeting with technology expert and State Department senior advisor Alec Ross. Open World continues to assist Deputy Orobets in her efforts to improve standardized testing and transparency in the higher-education admissions process; recently, for example, Open World arranged for her to meet with Georgian Open World alumni working to improve transparency in education.

Currently, Deputy Orobets is a prominent candidate in the election for Mayor of Kyiv, and is at the forefront of the democratic movement in Ukraine. Her popularity stems, in part, from the significant role she played in publicizing the plight of Ukrainians on the Maidan, and her passionate support of democracy in Ukraine. She was a constant presence on the Maidan, using social media to inform the world of the events.

- A Georgian delegate who travelled to St. Paul, MN to study accountable governance at the local level returned home to establish an independent online newspaper.
- The vice-speaker of the Moldovan Parliament travelled to Raleigh, NC in 2012 as part of the North Carolina-Moldova Sister State partnership. The delegate returned home and launched the Political School for Women Project, which trains women and encourages them to get actively involved in politics and public life. The delegate reported that “As part of the Open World visit in the U.S., I was impressed by the efficient communication within public institutions, and upon my return to Moldova I started replicating the American model in my daily activity as an MP. The Political School for Women Project is a good example in this regard. I wanted Moldovan women to learn how to communicate efficiently within our network, how to engage in and conduct civilized, efficient debates, how to be tolerant, respectful and promote the values of a mature democracy. I am encouraging young politicians to participate in Open World and bring positive change to Moldova.”

We pride ourselves on choosing the highest quality delegates—true rising leaders—which we can track when delegates report back on their promotions. Two Georgian delegates travelled to Maryville, TN in 2009 in their capacities as directors at different policy and management consulting firms. They are now the Deputy Minister of Finance and the Deputy Minister of Defense.

### **Plans for 2014 and Beyond**

The Open World Leadership Center is a small, flexible, and efficient agency. As such, we are able to quickly respond to changing geo-political climates to maximize efforts to aid Congress in its oversight responsibilities. We currently have plans to increase delegations from Ukraine; our Ukrainian partners have highlighted an immediate need for groups to study PTSD, traumatic injury, and emergency response as a result of the recent events in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine. We also plan to bring groups with more long range objectives: business leaders from regions facing the challenge of the loss of markets in Russia; judges and court administrators (as reforms begin in that troubled arena); regional legislators and mayors.

For 2015, Open World will continue the initiatives described above, both in terms of responsiveness to Congressional requests and in focusing on the younger generation of leaders in Open World countries. We will strive to find partnerships and other cost-sharing arrangements to maximize our effectiveness.

### **A Model of Budget Efficiency**

Open World offers Congress an extraordinary “bang for the buck,” serving as a model of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and value. Open World boasts an overhead rate of just 7 percent with 93 percent of our annual expenditures going directly to program costs. Open World

investigates and pursues every opportunity for savings and diligently manages its fiscal operations with a goal of reducing costs without compromising program quality.

Open World employs best practices to develop the most cost-efficient and effective means to accomplish our mission. Early on Open World established internal controls to ensure program quality, including pre- and post-program report follow-up, weekly teleconferencing with our logistical contractor, and regular contact with grantees and local hosts. Open World uses a zero-based budget approach to every contract, every grant budget, as well as our annual operating budget. Open World actively seeks cost-sharing partnerships with other government initiatives whose missions complement ours. The U.S. Agency for International Development, the Department of Energy, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the embassies in Armenia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan have all joined with the Open World Leadership Center in directly funding a number of delegations.

Funding at the requested level of \$8 million will enable Open World to fully respond to Congressional interests in the region and beyond while continuing our proven mission of hosting young political and civic leaders who return home to launch projects and programs in cooperation with their American counterparts and hosts. The Board of Trustees believes that maintaining a robust grassroots-based Open World presence in the region is necessary and important for future U.S. relations in these politically significant countries.