

Testimony of Jane Sargus
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Committees on Appropriations
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Chairman Valadao, Ranking Member Espaillat and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record on behalf of the Congressional Office for International Leadership (COIL or the Office). Congressional participation on our governing board and in our programming has made COIL uniquely positioned to support Members in conducting Congressional Diplomacy and in serving their constituents across the country. We are deeply grateful for your support and commitment to this agency.

The Office administers the Open World Program (OWP) – a legislative branch Congressional Diplomacy tool that has brought international leaders to the United States since 1999. At its inception, the program focused on bringing rising leaders from a handful of post-Soviet countries to the United States, building mutual understanding and informal networks between our nations. Since then, at the direction of Congress, COIL has expanded the OWP portfolio to include 29 countries throughout Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, bringing hundreds of delegates annually to meet their professional counterparts in Congress and across the United States.

Serving Member Interests

COIL's mission is centered on serving Congress, and we support the legislative branch through the OWP in alignment with Member interests and priorities. What began as a single-country initiative in 1999 has grown, entirely through congressional request, into a network of 29 active country programs.

Our programming is responsive by design. We introduce new themes to reflect emerging global challenges and areas of strategic interest to the United States. For example, in response to the evolving needs of Congress and our partners in-region, we've added new sub-themes within our Ukraine program, such as critical mineral development, post-conflict reconstruction, and energy security. Rising tensions with the People's Republic of China and related trade and security issues have led to the development of a robust Indo-Pacific parliamentary program, which in 2025 includes six key regional partners. These efforts are designed to deliver candid, firsthand perspectives to Congress that inform policymaking in real time. COIL, and more specifically the OWP, exists as a tool for Congress: one that delivers poignant, unfiltered information directly to decision-makers on Capitol Hill.

COIL's Future

In a continually shifting geopolitical and socioeconomic landscape, COIL will continue to bring relevant, impactful delegations to brief Congress and to build relationships with ordinary Americans. With a fully funded budget in FY2026, we plan to expand our Indo-Pacific

programming, emphasizing legislative relationship building and trade and security issues. The agency will also devote additional staff support to forming the critical partnerships and projects that become the legacy of the OWP. Increasing the number of regional delegations is also a priority, as bringing multinational delegations together on issues gives programs a novel, holistic element to the common challenges those countries may face.

Understanding the stewardship and responsibility that comes along with public funds, COIL has exercised cautious judgment about requesting an increase. FY2025 is the thirteenth consecutive fiscal year that the agency has operated with an appropriation at or below \$6 million. Despite cost-saving measures, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain optimal operations while enhancing the OWP. We respectfully request an increase of \$1.2 million in FY2026.

Benefit to American Communities

Community demand for the OWP is so great that the agency could only accommodate 63% of proposals in 2025. Local organizations like Rotary clubs, world affairs councils, and community colleges host programming year after year, and provide perhaps the most unique element of the Open World model: the home stay. By placing each participant in an American family home for the duration of their stay, our participants and their American hosts achieve an indelible and positive imprint on each other that lasts for the rest of their lives.

COIL has worked with local partners through the OWP to host delegates in over 3,000 communities in every state across America. After COIL awards local host organizations with grants, local partners work tirelessly to create robust programming for OWP delegations. These programs achieve two objectives: 1.) They enrich the local community by stimulating conversation and education about important domestic and international topics, and 2.) They showcase U.S. state and community eclecticism to international partners and stakeholders.

Host communities across the United States participate in order to build relationships with interesting delegates, and receive a modest but important revenue stream. As a program that is proudly American, at least 90% of appropriated funds are spent in the United States. As a result, nearly all of COIL's appropriation is reinvested back into American communities, rural and urban alike.

This unique structure – combining professional programming with cultural immersion – has proven to be a powerful, cost-effective, and sustainable approach to Congressional Diplomacy. Over time, it has fostered a network of professional and personal relationships that deliver lasting benefits at home and abroad.

Rising Operating Costs and Fiscal Responsibility

COIL's modest funding level has allowed us to deliver an outsized impact for Congress and American communities. However, current funding levels do not sufficiently empower COIL to meet the needs of Congress and constituents.

Since 2019, the cost-of-living adjustment for salaries has approached nearly 20%, while benefit rates have increased by at least 10%. In addition, the cost of our annual audit – a mandatory

requirement – has more than doubled, now exceeding \$94,000. COIL has absorbed these increases through internal efficiencies, including staffing reductions and streamlining administrative operations.

The cost per delegate has also nearly doubled since 2019 due to factors outside the agency's control. These include rising grant line-item costs, such as van rentals, fuel, food, and driver support, as well as escalating logistical and travel contract expenses. Additionally, airfare for delegates from the Indo-Pacific is often 30% higher than travel from other regions we work in. Despite these pressures, COIL continues to deliver high-impact programming because of strong partnerships with local host organizations.

However, cost-sharing has reached its ceiling. Local hosts now contribute at maximum sustainable levels, often supplementing Open World programing with in-kind donations, volunteer labor, and financial support. Without an increase in our appropriation, COIL risks being forced to reduce the number of delegates we bring, reduce the number of countries we partner with, or eliminate themes aligned with evolving congressional interests.

With nearly all of our appropriation reinvested directly into U.S. communities, COIL continues to represent one of the most cost-effective tools available to Congress for cultivating global relationships, supporting American civil society, and advancing U.S. interests. The requested \$1.2 million increase would empower COIL to meet rising programmatic costs, enhance OWP initiatives through new and responsive themes, and maintain the scale and caliber of programming that Members of Congress have come to rely on.

Update: Indo-Pacific

COIL continues to rapidly expand Indo-Pacific programming in response to regional interest and congressional support. Since launching in 2022, the program has grown from three to eight participating countries. In 2025, COIL will host 78 delegates from Vietnam, Indonesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Mongolia, including 54 Members of Parliament.

The program's continued expansion reflects both the strategic importance of the region and COIL's ability to foster high-impact engagement where traditional diplomatic tools face challenges. In Vietnam, COIL has facilitated robust exchanges with 12 Members of the National Assembly, with an additional 12 set to participate in 2025. Our ability to build strong relationships with the National Assembly has been recognized by U.S. executive branch partners as a valuable complement to ongoing diplomatic efforts. In 2025, COIL will welcome inaugural delegations of Members of Parliament from the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, and Vanuatu, further deepening our presence in the Pacific Islands. These delegations represent a significant milestone for the program, particularly in light of geopolitical competition in the region.

The Indo-Pacific initiative originated at the bipartisan request of Congressman Don Bacon (R-NE) and Congressman Ed Case (D-HI) and was launched in close consultation with U.S. Embassies in the region. From the outset, the program has been guided by two objectives: to

assess regional parliamentary interest in engagement with Congress and to enable sustained, peer-to-peer legislative dialogue across the region.

As COIL enters its fourth year of programming in the Indo-Pacific, we remain committed to building trust and ensuring that Members of Congress have access to unfiltered insights from one of the world's most dynamic regions.

Update: Ukraine

Since Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, COIL has hosted over 400 Ukrainian leaders, with that number expected to surpass 600 by the end of 2025. Delegates have included Members of Parliament, civil society leaders, polytrauma specialists, and frontline responders. Each delegation possesses a key role in informing Members of Congress, in supporting anti-corruption reforms, and in preparing Ukraine for post-war reconstruction.

COIL's partnerships with Ukraine's legislature, government ministries, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs have produced lasting, tangible outcomes. In 2024, one such initiative brought together Ukrainian and American veterans' affairs professionals to exchange best practices for supporting injured service members and reintegrating veterans into civilian life. Ukrainian delegates visited polytrauma centers across the United States, sharing firsthand accounts of battlefield medicine and learning from U.S. systems of long-term care. As a result, U.S. institutions and professionals learn about the effects of modern warfare on military and battlefield stakeholders, providing lessons-learned for the betterment of the United States. These exchanges have continued to lay robust groundwork for growing partnerships between the Ukrainian Ministry of Veterans Affairs and U.S. government institutions.

COIL's parliamentary programming remains central to the U.S.-Ukraine relationship, providing Members of Congress the opportunity to engage directly with Ukrainian lawmakers, including members of the Special Forces and Verkhovna Rada committee chairs on national security, energy, and budget. These engagements offer insights on topics ranging from aid accountability to battlefield developments and wartime governance. Notably, over 10% of the current Verkhovna Rada has participated in COIL programs, with alumni serving in ministerial roles and on nearly every parliamentary committee.

As COIL prepares to host 12 Members of Parliament and hundreds of civil society leaders in 2025, our Ukraine programming continues to be a cornerstone of congressional engagement on the war.

Update: Belarus

In 2024, COIL resumed engagement with the people of Belarus through the OWP, following a multi-year pause prompted by the Lukashenko regime's support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Working in partnership with the U.S.-recognized Belarusian Coordination Council, Belarus' democratically elected government in exile, and the U.S. Embassy in Vilnius, COIL launched a new initiative to support actors resisting authoritarian rule.

COIL’s 2025 Belarusian programming focuses on governance and strengthening its relationship with the Coordination Council. These delegations create vital space for dialogue between Congress and Belarus’ U.S.-recognized government-in-exile.

Update: Regional Delegations

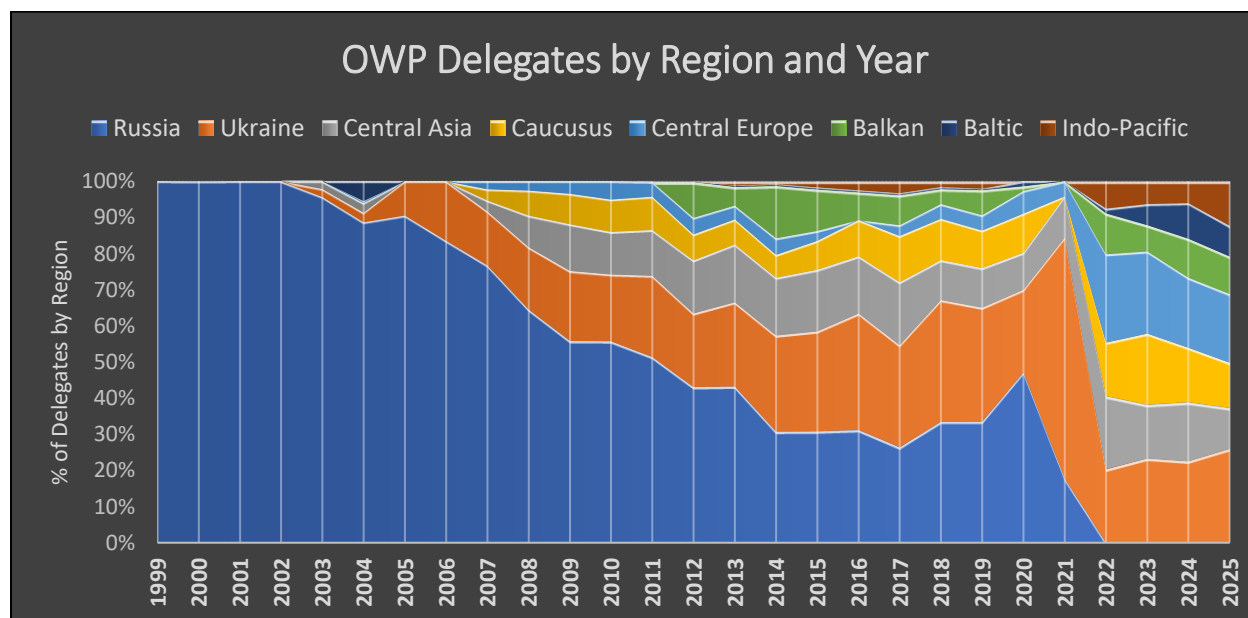
Launched in 2023, COIL’s regional delegation model continues to deliver cost savings and foster collaborative problem-solving by bringing together stakeholders from multiple countries within a single region. What began with participants from Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia has since expanded to include leaders from Central Asia, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe. In 2024, COIL welcomed its first Central Asian regional delegation, bringing together participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

In 2025, COIL will build on this momentum by hosting regional delegations from the Balkans and Central Asia, along with a new Romanian-Moldovan joint delegation. These three programs will bring 33 professionals from 10 countries to the United States, more than doubling the size of COIL’s regional programming since its inception just two years ago.

Regional delegations expose participants to American democracy alongside peers from neighboring countries, many of whom share complicated histories. This approach creates a unique space for collaboration, helping delegates associate Congress not only with American values, but also with the possibilities of regional cooperation.

COIL is also working to replicate this success in the Indo-Pacific by piloting regional programming for Pacific Island nations in 2025. This effort, being pursued in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University, if finalized, will provide Congress with new opportunities to engage rising leaders from one of the most important regions in the world.

OWP Delegate Breakdown by Country



Note: OWP in-person availability was impacted by 2021 travel restrictions, hence the lower number of delegates and countries.