

Statement of Jane Sargus
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Before the
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
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Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the Open World Leadership Center's budget request for fiscal 2020. In this request, the Center is asking for \$5.8 million, an increase of \$200,000 or 3.6% over the 2019 enacted appropriation. Open World has been at the current enacted level since fiscal 2016. The increased funds are needed mostly for program costs, especially airfare, accommodations, and other logistical expenses.

The Center conducts a one-of-a-kind, peer-to-peer exchange program in the legislative branch that has hosted more than 28,000 emerging leaders from Russia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet and transitional states since 1999. In 2018, more than 140 of our participants were either Members of Parliament, Parliamentary staff, or regional and local legislators. By the end of this year, we will have hosted our 20,000th Russian participant.

As a legislative branch agency, the Center is well-placed to provide critical support to Congress in its foreign affairs oversight responsibilities. Indeed, this placement is the leading component of the success of the Open World program in these strategically important countries. Providing programs for informed citizens and in turn for more informed legislators is universally a good thing – and we do this in an extremely critical region of the world where transparency and accountable governance are not traditions.

On the program side, Open World has an American hosting network of service clubs, local NGO's and community colleges as well as thousands of volunteer host families. In 2018, these host families lived in nearly 120 congressional districts in 48 states and contributed nearly \$2 million worth of in-kind contributions. Coupled with an increasing number of U.S. embassies working directly with Open World and other cost sharing partners, this keeps the per person cost of an Open World delegate at about \$9,000 – far below the standard executive branch rate of nearly \$20,000 per person.

Open World's young leaders stay in private homes in American communities across the country. They discuss topical issues of mutual interest and experience firsthand the

functioning of our democratic institutions. They talk with their counterparts during the professional program and go back to their countries with high praise for that and for their American host families. This is how the Open World program nurtures civil society that develops not only from the top down, but from the ground up and the periphery in. Each year, there are new American civic organizations such as Friendship Force, Rotary, Sister City or other clubs joining the Open World network. And because of this network, these future leaders from Eurasia form positive views of the United States which in turn will influence attitudes in their home countries.

But the most important work we do is to showcase the American system of governance, in particular the legislative process. Did you know that the Americans with Disabilities Act has impacted communities far beyond our borders? Last year, a delegation from Azerbaijan with three disabled participants went to Reno, Nevada to examine how that law could be replicated in their country. That the GI Bill and other Veteran-related legislation inspired the Ukrainian Parliament to establish the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs last year? An Open World delegation hosted in Maryville, Tennessee on Veterans' Issues is taking the lead to help craft legal and legislative language addressing these needs. That the Freedom of Information Act leaves an indelible impression on the many Russian journalists and media specialists that come on the Open World program? When a state journalist from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's press pool expresses a favorable impression of the work of the Voice of America, acknowledging its independence, no less, we have just made an inroad in countering disinformation.

For the United States Congress, the Open World Leadership Center is a resource: our delegations are ready and willing to provide on-the-ground information – unfiltered information – about events and developments in their countries.

Open World is an asset: our Parliamentary program is unmatched in the Legislative Branch. When your counterparts in Open World countries meet with you, you are getting direct and firsthand information. This in turn becomes the basis for a more informed foreign policy.

Open World is an investment: bringing delegations of rising leaders to meet with their counterparts here creates a global network of partners united in a common goal – to endow democracies in transition with the basic ingredients of accountable governance and transparency in a civil society.

The Open World program is your toolkit for supporting democracies in transition; a toolkit that creates opportunities for Open World participants to experience how legislative action is the change agent their governments may need; a toolkit that allows America's constituents to engage personally in strengthening civil society in other countries. In these countries that do not have a tradition of open debate or legitimate opportunities to propose

alternatives for their government, our participants see how the legislative process can empower them to be that force for change.

Most importantly, though, the Open World program is an effective one precisely because it is in the legislative branch. In today's geopolitical environment, legislative diplomacy emerges as a unique but no less powerful tool for engaging governments in critical regions of the world.

There are good examples of Open World success stories itemized in the Congressional justification. This unique program continues to succeed in a shifting landscape where it has achieved a special status in the successor states of the former Soviet Union and elsewhere. On behalf of all of us at the Center, I thank the Subcommittee for its interest in and support of the Open World Leadership Center.