

**Testimony of Jane Sargus**  
**Executive Director, Congressional Office for International Leadership**  
**For the Subcommittees on the Legislative Branch**  
**Committees on Appropriations**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**April 16, 2024**

*“For almost 25 years, NNIC has grown alongside the Open World program – where the beginnings of our work to present the Reno-Tahoe area as a rapidly developing international community can be connected to the ability to host Open World programs, furthering our combined efforts to foster citizen focused diplomacy and human connection. As hundreds of visitors have come through Reno, so too have these hosts welcomed visitors into their homes for a week at a time to make an impact on the world through citizen diplomacy.”*

**Sara Jones, Northern Nevada International Center, Nevada**

Chairman Amodei, Ranking Member Espaillat and Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record on the Congressional Office for International Leadership (the Office, COIL). Congressional participation on our governing board and in our programs has made the Office uniquely qualified to support Members’ conduct of Congressional diplomacy and to serve Members, their constituents and communities across America. All of us at the Office are deeply grateful for your support.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Congressional Office for International Leadership. The Office administers the Open World program, which is a legislative branch program that has brought international leaders to the United States since 1999. Our program is dedicated to engaging rising leaders from post-Soviet countries, and to building mutual understanding and informal networks between our nations. Since then, we’ve responded to congressional interest and have expanded to 24 countries throughout Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific, bringing hundreds of delegates annually to meet their professional counterparts across the United States.

**Overview**

Our program is centered on the American community – showing Open World program delegates how Americans work and live for ten days. COIL coordinates with on-the-ground partners in each participating country to nominate young, rising leaders in the thematic area of the program. Once selected, the delegates visit the United States for ten days. Two days are spent in Washington, DC, where experts introduce concepts of American culture, history, and civics, and delegates meet with Members of Congress and their staff. The meetings are generally arranged around common issues – their constituency, their committee assignments, and their approach to government. The balance of the program is spent in a host community, where a local grantee

arranges a rigorous professional program during the day, centered around the theme of the delegation. A unique feature of the Open World program is that participants stay in the homes of the local community, gaining an intimate view of the lives of their American colleagues. Our experience has determined that this model, of bringing together Americans and their peers, is an extremely effective way of building a successful program, and a network that supports both professional and social connections that stand the test of time, and lead to notable results that improve lives both at home and abroad.

### **Serving Member Interests**

COIL's mission is centered on its service to the Congress and seeks to support the legislature however it may through the Open World program. What started as the Russian Leadership Program in 1999 has now expanded to 24 active country programs through the process of congressional requests. Our programming closely adheres to the concerns and priorities of the Members, and we frequently add program themes to track ongoing challenges that the United States faces. Our Baltic countries feature strong cybersecurity programs as their infrastructure, as well as ours, is challenged by malicious digital actors. Concerns over security and trade issues related to an increasingly aggressive China resulted in our Indo-Pacific parliamentary program, which will encompass five key regional players by FY2025. COIL, and its Open World program, exist as a means of delivering poignant, unfiltered information directly to the decision-makers on Capitol Hill.

### **Benefit to American Communities**

The Open World program has worked with local partners to host delegates in over 3,000 communities in every state across America. The program has broad appeal, and demand is so great that the agency can only accommodate 25% of all proposals yearly. Local organizations like Rotary clubs, world affairs councils, and community colleges, host programming year after year, encouraged by building relationships with interesting delegates, pride in their community, and a modest but important revenue stream. As a program that is proudly American, nearly all appropriated funds are spent in the United States – reinvesting American dollars into American communities.

### **Strengthening Constituent Collaboration with Open World Countries**

COIL's programming leads to tangible benefits for American communities, and lasting partnerships with the agency's 30,000 strong alumni network. After returning home, Open World delegates led the creation of a sister city partnerships between Cedar Rapids, Iowa and Ferizaj, Kosovo; worked with the University of Nebraska Medical Center to develop a medical scholarship for Ukrainians; formed a research collaboration with Johns Hopkins University, and much more. Host families frequently engage in reciprocal travel, maintain correspondence with their visitors, and develop projects together. One delegate even helped rescue an American's extended family in Ukraine at the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2022. The bonds created on the program are durable and enriching. Below, quotes from a variety of Open World hosts are included, discussing the importance of the program to themselves and their locality.

## **COIL's Future**

In a continually shifting geopolitical and socioeconomic landscape and Congress' considerations along with it, COIL will continue to bring relevant, impactful delegations to brief Congress and to build relationships with ordinary Americans. With a fully funded budget in FY2025, we plan to expand our programming in the Indo-Pacific to heavily emphasize 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 Open World program. COIL also will expand its regional model, bringing multinational delegations on common issues, giving programs a novel, holistic element to the common challenges that are discussed. Finally, COIL will increase the overall delegate count to counter the attrition caused by inflation over the past several years. This will allow the agency to connect with more host communities, and create a broader, stronger hosting base. Understanding the stewardship and responsibility that comes along with public funds, COIL has exercised cautious judgment about requesting an increase. FY2025 is the first time in 11 years that the agency has requested an appropriation above \$6 million – despite cost saving measures, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain optimal operations. We respectfully request an increase of \$1.2 million in FY2025.

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### **Quotes from Hosts**

#### **Sheila Offman Gersh, Lehman College, Bronx, New York**

“I have been involved in Open World for about 8 years hosting young Eastern European professionals. Not only have these professionals been introduced to professionals related to their careers, but also to members of the local communities and in some cases, long lasting friendships. Lehman College recently hosted a group from Moldova where they were provided with expert information about their counseling program and how they prepare future counselors. This interaction was a “two-way” experience as Lehman College learned from the group and the group learned from Lehman College.

“Working with Open World has provided me with an outstanding experience of meeting young professionals from Eastern European countries. It's always a highlight of my professional life to meet the outstanding delegates. I am so happy to be part of the Open World team.”

#### **Judge Suzanne Mitchell, U.S. Magistrate Judge, OKC Rotary Club, Oklahoma**

“Over the past decade, Oklahoma City and Rotary Club 29 have hosted delegations from Azerbaijan, Georgia, North Macedonia, and Armenia, to name a few. We have made lasting friendships, continuing correspondence via email and in person, as I was fortunate enough to visit Skopje and continue discussions with our Macedonian colleagues. Currently, we are in discussions to create a Sister City relationship between Oklahoma City and Yerevan. COIL's programs inevitably lead to better understanding, lasting relationships, and unforeseen positive outcomes!”

#### **John Kun, Vice President, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, Falls Church, Virginia**

“In early 2019, the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation administered a Ukrainian “Renewal Energy” themed delegation. Ms. Oleksandra Tryboi was one of the Ukrainian delegates who was hosted by Ken and Sonja Ruffner, who reside just a few homes away from mine in Fairfax County, VA. Their bonds were very strong and in 2023, when Oleksandra and her family became refugees, it was the Ruffners who welcomed and sponsored her family’s pathway to the United States under the 2-year temporary Federal program, Uniting for Ukraine.

“The Tryboi family resided with the Ruffners for about six months until they were able to find employment and suitable, affordable housing in Herndon, VA.”

**Sherry Wileman, President, Friendship Force of Big Canoe/North Georgia, Georgia**

“Our club has been fortunate to host 6 Open World (OW) delegations. The delegates always ask the hosts to visit them in their own country. Our club was able to respond “yes” to that invitation from the three delegations from the Republic of Georgia. The delegates arranged memorable experiences for us and proudly shared their accomplishments since returning from their visit with us. All repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the OW program and our club members. We believe the impact the OW program has on the delegates is one they will never forget. As hosts, we treasure the relationships with the young people who visited us.”

**Carl Johnson, Kiwanis Club of Lansing, Kansas**

“As recently as last week, 18 months after the delegation, I heard host families sharing news and details, (wedding, new babies, job promotions etc.) of the delegates they had hosted. News from the delegates suggest that their careers have advanced very rapidly following their return, in part, I am sure, because they are remarkable individuals, but I like to think also benefited by the experience with the U.S. District Court and the Kansas Court system and homestay with Kansans.”

**Olya Czerkas, Ukrainian National Women’s League of America, Florida**

“Americans have greatly benefited from the Ukrainian team’s visit to the United States. Medicine was advanced as professional contacts were established, medical care systems were reevaluated, the delegation presented on their methods of surgery and patient treatment, and the impact of weaponry on victims. There were also non-medical benefits to our organization; hosts observed cultural differences, learned Ukrainian life during the ongoing war, connected with interested political officials, and established relationships with three other local organizations during the visit.”

**Elena Seitz, International Cultural Education Association, Illinois**

“The impact of the Open World program on our subsequent activities has been enormous and strongly educational. I personally coordinated a program in Boston for university librarians. My mother was the head of a library in a small Belarusian town for 40 years, and I grew up surrounded by books. It was a blessing for me to get into the famous libraries of Harvard University, MIT, Boston Public Library, etc. This program influenced my future choice of activities.”

*Excerpts have been edited for length and clarity.*