

## Open World Program Overview

Since its founding by Congress in 1999, the Open World Program has enabled more than 16,500 current and future Eurasian leaders to experience American democracy, civil society and community life; work with their American counterparts; stay in American homes; and gain new ideas and inspiration for implementing change back home. Some 6,500 American host families in all 50 states and over 250 congressional districts have partnered with the U.S. Congress and Open World to make this ambitious public diplomacy effort possible.

The program's short but high-intensity exchanges emphasize hands-on practical activities—such as workshops, job shadowing, and site visits—related to the delegates' professional or community work. Other key features of Open World are its large size, competitive selection process, emphasis on young regional and local leaders, homestays, lack of an English-language requirement, and focus on fostering mutual learning, partnerships, and long-term results.

**Participating Countries.** Open World currently operates exchanges for participants from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine.

**Objectives.** Open World's goals are to build mutual understanding between the United States and participating countries, to create a network of emerging Eurasian leaders dedicated to effecting positive change in their home countries, and to connect these leaders with their American professional colleagues and hosts who are interested in post-visit cooperation and collaboration that will generate concrete results.

**Delegates.** Open World delegates come from all levels of government, NGOs, the media, and the private sector. Past participants include members of parliament and local legislators; Supreme Court justices and justices of the peace; senior civil servants and young NGO activists; and election committee officials and political party organizers, to provide just a few examples.

In addition to targeting decision makers and opinion leaders—especially those at the regional and local levels—Open World recruits delegates who are relatively young (the average age is 38), and politically, ethnically, and geographically diverse. Women have made up 51 percent of Open World delegates over the life of the program.

**Partnerships.** Open World conducts its programs with the help of respected government agencies and NGOs in the United States and participating countries. U.S. and foreign government bodies and prominent international and local NGOs nominate most candidates. Finalists are then selected by committees composed mainly of U.S. Embassy staff. The U.S. visits are carried out by some 25 organizations with exchange-program

expertise that the Center competitively selects each year. These organizations either host delegations themselves or recruit local affiliates, civic organizations, educational institutions, and government bodies to do so. In addition to arranging the professional agendas, the locally based organizations provide meals, lodging, and cultural and social activities for the participants.

Most Open World exchanges for judicial delegations use a unique hosting model: U.S. judges plan and carry out the local programs, giving the delegates unparalleled access to the inner workings of the U.S. judicial system.

**Focus Themes.** Open World delegations and professional agendas are organized around a handful of timely and topical themes, which vary by country. The Center evaluates these themes at the outset of each program year for their continuing relevance to Open World's mission, the participating countries' needs, and U.S. foreign-policy objectives. Rule of law, accountable governance, and social issues are three of the most common themes for exchanges.

Open World also hosts special-focus exchanges, allowing the program to offer highly customized programming on issues of concern to participating countries and the United States. Notable examples from recent years include exchanges on nonproliferation issues (Russia program), avian flu (Russia program), legal aid (Moldova program), water management (Tajikistan program), and jury-trial management (Georgia and Kazakhstan programs).

**Activities.** A typical Open World exchange begins with two group orientations—the first in the participants' departure city (usually their national capital), the second usually in Washington, D.C. The orientations provide information on cultural differences, the U.S. model of federalism, and topics related to the delegations' themes. At the conclusion of their Washington session, participants travel in small delegations to different U.S. communities for their weeklong programs.

With only five or six members in a typical delegation, participants can engage in hands-on experiences, direct observation, job shadowing, and in-depth exchanges with their U.S. counterparts. Activities range from accompanying a political candidate on the campaign trail to joining a newspaper editorial meeting; and from attending a fund-raising workshop to discussing a sentence with the judge who just imposed it. Delegates also regularly share their own expertise with their host organizations and host communities by giving presentations or media interviews and taking part in expert panel discussions and roundtables. Most delegates have homestays, enabling them to experience American family and community life and to share information about their own countries with their hosts. Delegations and hosts regularly report that the homestays led to new friendships and broke down Cold War-era stereotypes and mistrust on both sides.

**Results.** Open World tracks the results of its exchanges through a network of alumni representatives, American hosts, and the alumni themselves. Below is a small sampling of recently reported results:

- A mayor in Azerbaijan placed several citizen suggestion boxes around his community after seeing such boxes during a visit to the Houston area in 2007.
- The head of a Russian NGO that fights youth drug abuse introduced peer-to-peer education at his institution after learning about this counseling approach during a 2008 Open World exchange to Wisconsin.
- A Ukrainian rule of law alumna, as a direct result of her 2007 trip to Des Moines, Iowa, began campaigning on her website for open, online land records to promote transparency in government.

**Organizational History.** Congress originally established Open World in May 1999 as a Library of Congress–run pilot exchange for emerging Russian leaders. This legislative initiative was inspired by an April 1999 speech on Russia by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington to an audience that included Members of Congress from both parties. In late 2000, Congress created the Open World Leadership Center as a separate legislative branch entity to manage the program. In 2003, Congress made the other Eurasian countries\* and the Baltic states eligible for Open World and expanded the Russia program to include cultural leaders. The Center’s board of trustees selected Lithuania, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan to pilot new exchanges, and Open World welcomed its first delegates from these nations in December 2003. One year later, Congress extended Open World eligibility to any countries designated by the Center’s board. In 2007/2008, Open World began hosting delegations from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

**Alumni Activities.** Open World’s privately funded alumni program encourages the formation of local, regional, national, and international networks of leaders who collaborate with each other on projects and other initiatives. It does so in part by encouraging ongoing communication and partnerships among hosts and alumni and their respective communities and facilitating reciprocal working visits by Americans involved in Open World exchanges. Open World also organizes in-country alumni conferences, seminars, and meetings to continue the information exchange begun during the U.S. visit and to promote alumni networking. Finally, the alumni program serves as an information clearinghouse by offering list serves on news and grants, publishing a Russian-language alumni bulletin, and providing a professional networking site, the Digital Directory.

For more information on the Open World Program, please visit <http://www.openworld.gov>.

\*Defined here as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.