

**Statement of Ambassador John O’Keefe  
Executive Director  
Open World Leadership Center  
For The Legislative Branch Subcommittee  
Of the Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
March 31, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Hoeven, and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to submit testimony on the Open World Leadership Center’s budget request for fiscal year 2012. The Open World Leadership Center, of which I am the Executive Director, is a unique resource that links Congress and its constituents to the strategically important regions of Eurasia that contain not only the world’s largest gas reserves but also one of the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons. In this capacity, the Center administers the Open World program that allows community leaders throughout America to discuss issues ranging from nonproliferation to rule of law in face-to-face settings with emerging young, professional counterparts from Eurasia to develop projects and partnerships. In the past eleven years, Open World grants have enabled some 6,500 American families in almost 2,000 communities around the country to host program participants.

Since its inception, the Center has awarded grants for overseeing our U.S. exchanges to **61 organizations** headquartered in **25 different states** and the District of Columbia. These grantee organizations host delegations themselves or award sub-grants to local host organizations. By 2011, **well over 700 local host organizations**—including Rotary clubs and other service organizations, sister-city associations, international visitor councils, universities and community colleges, and other nonprofits in all **50 states** and the District of Columbia—had conducted Open World exchanges for the Center.

More than **75 percent** of Open World’s fiscal year 2010 appropriated funds were expended on U.S. goods and services through contracts and grants—much of it at the local community level. American volunteers in **49 states and the District of Columbia** home hosted Open World participants in calendar year 2010, contributing a large portion of the estimated \$1.9 million given to the program through cost shares.

Nearly 17,000 emerging leaders from Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Lithuania, and Uzbekistan have participated in Open World. Earlier this month, our inaugural delegation of women-as-leaders from Armenia will travel to Des Moines, Iowa. While all the countries where Open World is active are strategically important to the interests of the U.S. government, they are also areas of growing economies where opportunities for foreign investment and trade increase yearly.

With the requested funding level of **\$12.6 million**, the Center will be able to continue its support of Congress in inter-parliamentary and other legislative activities and bring 1,300 or more participants to communities throughout the United States in 2012. Actual allocations of participant slots to individual countries will be based on Board of Trustees recommendations and consultations with the Subcommittee and the U.S.

embassies in these countries. The requested funding will allow us to fulfill the Board mandated strategic plan to expand into Uzbekistan and Belarus, to meet our continuing plan to intensify legislator to legislator programs, and to reach the rising new generation in Russia and elsewhere who remember the Cold War as a fading memory, if at all.

Open World will facilitate existing projects and partnerships among hundreds of American civic organizations, numerous communities, and thousands of participating constituents and the regional parliamentarians and other leaders from Open World countries hosted here. We ask for an increase of **\$600,000** to begin our Board of Trustees-approved expansion into Belarus, and to resume our Uzbek program suspended in 2005.

Major categories of requested funding for a total of \$12.6 million are:

- Program Expenses (**\$.5 mil**)
- Operating Expenses (**\$.9 mil**)
- Contract (**\$7.2 mil** – awarded to U.S.-based entities) that include:
  - Coordinating the delegate nomination and vetting process
  - Obtaining visas and other travel documents
  - Arranging and paying for air travel
  - Coordinating with grantees and placing delegates
- Grants (**\$4.0 mil** – awarded to U.S. host organizations) that include:
  - Professional programming for delegates
  - Meals outside of those provided by home hosts
  - Community activities
  - Professional interpretation
  - Administrative support

## **Open World and Congress**

As a U.S. Legislative Branch entity, the Open World Leadership Center actively supports the foreign relations efforts of Congress by linking our delegates to members and to experienced and enthusiastic constituents throughout the United States who are engaged in projects and programs in Open World countries. The Open World program routinely involves members in its hosting activities with more than fifty percent of delegates meeting with Members of Congress or their staff representatives last year.

The Center also regularly consults with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Congressional Georgia Caucus, the Congressional Ukrainian Caucus, the Russia Caucus, the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus, the Congressional Caucus on Central Asia, the Friends of Kazakhstan Caucus, other Congressional entities,

and individual Members with specific interests in Open World countries or thematic areas.

*In December 2010, Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine gave a delegation of legislators from the Chechen Republic a joint resolution encouraging the peace process, a return to civil society and international cooperation, and signed by 200 representatives in the legislature of the State of Maine. The resolution reflects the State of Maine's support for stability and engagement in the region. The Senator had tried unsuccessfully to deliver the resolution via the Russian Embassy in Washington several times since 2008, so was pleased to be able to pass it on to the Chechen group.*

*Last March, Rep. Peter Roskam greeted education officials from the Republic of Georgia in the home of their host, George Palamattam, on their first day in Chicago. Rep. Roskam surprised and delighted the delegates and host families present with the news that as a student he had visited Georgia. The discussion that followed covered a variety of topics that was very informational and educational for the Congressman, the host families, and everyone else who was present.*

*Last month, Senator Bernie Sanders, Rep. Robert Aderholt, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, Rep. Robert J. Wittman, and Rep. Dennis Kucinich met with two members of the Russian Federation lower house of parliament (Duma) on their first visit to the United States. They discussed topics related to education, labor, employment and parliamentary ties. The Russians also met with Maryland State Assembly members, State Department officials, foreign policy experts, and students and faculty of Georgetown University and the University of Maryland.*

Members of Congress and their staffs also provide Open World delegates with invaluable firsthand information on the U.S. legislative process, constituent relations, and other aspects of the U.S. government in face-to-face meetings that forcefully demonstrate how accessible the offices of elected officials can and should be. It is a message not lost on Open World participants, who come from a part of the world where such openness is still the exception rather than the rule and where constituent services are non-existent or diminishing.

Open World's Board-approved Strategic Plan for 2012-2015 emphasizes increasing the Center's legislative activities and focus. One of the key goals is to serve Members of Congress by becoming a recognized resource that connects them to emerging leaders of participating countries. Currently, we have scheduled five delegations of Parliamentarians from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (2), Moldova and Russia and are planning three more from Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine. Furthermore, the Center is able to link Members traveling to Open World countries with alumni who can offer an unfiltered view of the issues of interest to United States. To this end, Open World will seek to increase the number of legislator participants from program countries and meetings with U.S. legislators; broaden the legislative component of local host programs; and partner more effectively with U.S. organizations that will increase Open World's effectiveness in serving Members.

## **Recent Program Highlights and Results**

In 2010, Open World continued to focus on hosting in themes of interest to Congress and of transnational impact, including human-trafficking prevention, government and court transparency, nonproliferation, and environmental protection. Open World also sponsors hosting that promote economic and civic partnerships between American communities or states and their counterparts abroad.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

*Erkin Alymbekov participated in the Open World program as a member of the first delegation of parliamentarians from Kyrgyzstan in June 2007, when he was Vice-Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament. He was hosted in Montana on a program focusing on accountable governance, and the following year he hosted Carol Williams, President of the Montana State Senate, when she visited Kyrgyzstan. Following a revolution in Kyrgyzstan and the ouster of President Bakiev in April 2010, he was tasked by interim President Roza Otunbayeva to be one of the co-authors of the draft of the new constitution. Mr. Alymbekov later stated that his Open World experience and a copy of the Montana constitution helped him in revising his country's own using the basic principles and concepts that work in the United States. Passed by a referendum held in June 2010, the new constitution shifted many powers from the executive branch to that of the legislature, enabling Kyrgyzstan to become the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia.*

### **Georgia**

*Attorney John Hall, of Atlanta, Georgia, first hosted Open World delegates from the Republic of Georgia in 2007. After hosting several such delegations, he developed an interest in the region as well as a network that led to his becoming the Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Georgia in 2009 and the opening of his firm's business in Tbilisi last year. In regard to Open World's role in this, he stated:*

*“As a direct result of this program and the continued relationships (we have hosted eight additional Open World delegations since February 2007, we have become leaders of the Atlanta Tbilisi Sister City Program, [have] partnered with U.S. Department of Commerce to put on two economic forums, helped coordinate the visit of five Members of Congress to Tbilisi, [and] arranged an American development company to start a project in Georgia. This and many other activities are a direct result of Open World's Congressional exchange program. I urge Congress to keep this valuable program together and would welcome the opportunity to show Members the many different facets of, and opportunities in, the Republic of Georgia.”*

### **Moldova**

*Before March 2010, Moldovan mayors and local legislators belonged to different regional associations in Moldova. After their visit on the Open World program, and with the support of an organization active in local reforms, these alumni decided to*

*form the Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova (CALM), uniting all four regional associations. The Congress plans to create a strategy for decentralization, provide counsel to local governments, lobby on behalf of local governments, support local social and economic development, and increase the effectiveness of public procurement. Nine Open World alumni are on the association's governing board, including the association's president, Tatiana Badan. There are currently 300 members in the Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova and 63 of them are on the governing board representing 29 regions.*

*U.S. Ambassador to Moldova Asif Chaudhry highlighted this result in a letter to Open World Executive Director John O'Keefe, stating that "Open World directly supports key U.S. policy priorities in Moldova and the region" and that he applauds "Open World's focus on building partnerships between Moldovan and American people and institutions." (letter of February 17, 2011).*

### **Russia**

*Open World alumnus and former ship navigator Eduard Perepelkin became a crusader for Russia's "street" children. Perepelkin's 2008 Open World visit, which included an inspiring session at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, made him even more determined. On his return home, he did what is still, in post-Soviet Russia, the unthinkable—he strode uninvited into the mayor's office and persuaded him to increase funding for youth services. In July 2010, Perepelkin was back in Washington, the site of his 2008 Open World visit, for a meeting of the U.S. Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission's Working Group on Civil Society. And now that Perepelkin's efforts have caught the attention of national officials, this former ship navigator hopes to help his country steer many more children away from the streets.*

*One of the hallmarks of the Open World program is the multiplier effect and impact on both the hosting community in America and that of the participants. From the get-go and throughout the program participants understand that, in many ways, the program only really begins once they return to their countries of origin to bring about partnerships and joint projects. One such example is a \$150,000 grant from the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation to an Open World partner that will allow nurses in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and Balakovo, Russia to work together on cancer prevention and treatment. Open World alumni will participate in education programs with nursing faculty from Gundersen Lutheran Health System and will apply their new knowledge and skills at the Balakovo Secondary Medical School for nurses. At the end of the two year project, it is anticipated that Open World alumni will have trained approximately 500 nurses in state of the art cancer care.*

### **Ukraine**

*Olena Sichkar, Deputy Head of State Social Services for Family, Children and Youth, met with John Picarelli, Social Science Analyst, Member of the U.S. Government Special Policy Operating Group on Trafficking (SPOG) and Carson*

*Osberg, Case Manager, Counter-Trafficking Unit of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). On March 18, 2010 Mrs. Sichkar's agency and the IOM signed an indefinite-term partnership agreement. This partnership is focused on joint project work and organizing seminars, conferences, and study programs to prevent international human trafficking and to inform the Ukrainian population about this serious social issue.*

## **Open World's 2011 Activities and Plans for 2012**

For 2011, Open World continues to host in thematic areas that advance U.S. national interests in general, and Congressional interests in particular, and that generate concrete results while strengthening the ties between American communities and their partners abroad.

In 2011, the Center will host additional members of the legislative branches of current Open World countries—especially legislators from Central Asia and the Caucasus, based on Congressional interest. In February 2011, the Center hosted seven groups of Russian legislators and an additional delegation of State Duma (House) members. The following month, we brought five groups of Ukrainian regional legislators. And in the fall, we are bringing a dynamic group of Ukrainian women leaders through contacts developed by Rep. Marcy Kaptur. By the end of 2011, we will have brought over 100 regional and federal legislators from Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.

Open World is becoming an increasingly recognized resource for American citizens engaged in citizen diplomacy. Earlier this month, former Congressman James Symington worked with Open World alumni to organize an art exhibit in Moscow focused on Abraham Lincoln and the Czar Liberator, Alexander II. Congressman James Moran hosted an art exhibit in the Rayburn House Office Building featuring artworks by Russian orphans in collaboration with civil society leaders based in his Congressional district who approached Open World for guidance. Up to 60 U.S. university student body presidents will have visited Russia by December 2011 in a Russian Government sponsored exchange program that is both informed and inspired by the Open World model. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Senator Roger Wicker, Senator Bill Nelson, and Senator Bernie Sanders were some of the Members of Congress who nominated student body presidents for this exchange.

Open World, through private funding, will continue to develop its more than 16,500-person alumni network by holding forums and workshops and making use of contemporary technology provided by such services as Skype and social networking sites in the official languages of Open World countries. This alumni network plays a major role in maintaining program momentum and vibrancy by helping to identify new emerging leaders who might participate in Open World. Alumni are also central to furthering projects and partnerships that demand regular and effective communication. One very important group that exemplifies this trait is the 100-strong participants of the Open World non-proliferation program from the last two years who will be convening in May. The communications technology that Open World has set up enables these relationships to thrive in a cost-effective manner during these times of budgetary constraints.

## **Conclusion**

Open World offers an extraordinary “bang for the buck” in terms of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, value, and an investment in the future U.S. relations with the countries where the program operates. The Center boasts an overhead rate of about 7 percent, every grant contains cost-shared elements, and more than 75 percent of our appropriation is plowed back into the American economy every year.

In the future, there will be in-depth program changes that will increase Congressional involvement in Open World and will increase support to the constituent hosts who have established programs and partnerships in Open World countries. With funding at the requested level of \$12.6 million, Americans in hundreds of Congressional Districts throughout the United States will engage up-and-coming Eurasian political and civic leaders—such as parliamentarians, environmentalists, and anti-human trafficking activists—in projects and ongoing partnerships. Americans will, once again, open their doors and give generously to help sustain this successful congressional program that focuses on a region of profound interest to U.S. foreign policy. To that end, the Subcommittee’s interest and support have been essential ingredients in Open World’s success.