



## “Sustaining Civic Participation in Minority Communities”

Testimony from the Spring 2015 Professional Fellows Delegation  
from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia  
visiting the United States in April 19 - June 5, 2015



*April 22, 2015, City of Toledo, Ohio - First day in Toledo: (in the middle L-R) Councilwoman Lindsay Webb, Toledo Mayor Paula Hicks-Hudson and George Sarantou, former Councilman at Large at the city of Toledo had a meeting with 22-member Spring delegation of Professional Fellows from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia.*

**THANK YOU TO U.S. MENTORS & HOST ORGANIZATIONS & HOST FAMILIES  
FOR THEIR GENEROUS HELP TO OUR DELEGATION!**

**Joe & Kristin Szakos, Nik Belanger, Barbara Yager, Jim Field, Hannah Willage & Zach Schroeder, Rachel Ramirez, Richard Goldstein & Julie O'Brien, Marc & Debora Willage, Jennifer Ritter, Ellen Glover, Andrew Tonachel, Lori Clark, Kelly Viselman, Jeanne Mayer, Regina McGraw, Nancy Aardema, Joanna Brown & Josh Hoyt, Lucy Gomez, Louis Goseland, Armando Minjarez, Laura & Aaron Dungan, Emira Palacios, George Rivera, Abigail Parrish, Sarah Jane Knoy & Kevin Kintner, Kathy Urie, Tara Parrish, Marguerite Foster Franklin, Sondra Yodelman, Mo George, Jennifer Hadlock, Sandra Killett, Alan Reiff and many others!**



*Sponsored by the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs,  
Office of Citizen Exchanges, Professional Fellows Division.  
Locally organized by Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development*



### **Nevena Pashova - Sofia, Bulgaria**

#### **Internship with Pioneer Valley Project, Springfield, Massachusetts**



“The experience in the USA is a lifetime experience for me. I saw the difference between the people here and the people in Europe in the positive way. I have had the most incredible and inspiring host family, host organization and colleagues. The time spent in the USA helped me develop myself in a professional, personal and cultural way. I've learned about the power and that the power is based on the relationships between the people in the community. It is always with the community and for the community; it is not about the individual person, but for the power of the whole community. Thank you very much for this great opportunity!”

### **Peter Petak – Pecs, Hungary**

#### **Internship with Virginia Organizing, Charlottesville, Virginia**



“I will be working on social change, especially on social justice and participation in the decision-making processes through the development of my professional support to the new community organizers working country-wide by providing the training and motivation and by mentoring them. At Virginia Organizing, I learned how to build a statewide organization, how to help organizers and follow up on their progression. Thanks for this great and useful experience.”

### **Ionela Ciolan – Bucharest, Romania**

#### **Internship with Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, Chicago, Illinois**



“The U.S. Department of State Professional Fellowship was my first direct encounter with the American state and culture. It was an amazing experience because I had the chance to meet with other people with the same interests, in fighting for human rights for minorities, and exchange ideas and good practices. During my fellowship here, I have learned tremendously about community organizing, leadership development, fundraising and the social issues of homelessness. I have learned about organizing direct actions and good advocacy campaigns.

I have learned how to motivate and inspire leaders and how to build long and lasting relationships with the members of the community where I am involved. It was not only a professional journey, it was also a personal one where I have found out more about myself and now I am feeling empowered to go back home and try to apply the lessons I have learned back in my community with the purpose of creating a better one, a better Romania.”

### **Eva Riečanska – Bratislava, Slovakia**

#### **Internship with One Northside, Chicago, Illinois**



“For me, this was an excellent opportunity to get a real-life, insider perspective on what community organizing means, how it is done and, most importantly, what a difference it can make in people’s lives. I am happy I could gain this experience in the city where the “father” of community organizing, Saul Alinsky, first started to work with poor communities from central and Eastern Europe to organize for social change and betterment of their lives. To me, this connection is symbolic and my experience exceeded my expectations.

Chicago is a great city, and I am glad, I could closely know its history, its cultural diversity, its people and make new friends. I gained a new perspective on social justice struggles in the U.S. and in the world as many problems and challenges transcend national borders. I could see the power of community organizing and gained a lot of inspiration that I know will be of great added value to my work in Slovakia. The key to successful community organizing is the human connection. Hence, I wish to give my thanks to all who made my U.S. stay interesting, enriching and above all – very pleasant. Thank you, friends!”

### Dilyana Gyurova - Sofia, Bulgaria

#### Internship with The Seed House, Wichita, Kansas



“Community Organizing was a brand new concept for me, when I arrived to the U.S. about a month and a half ago. Now, after having had some short but intense sessions with the many mentors, activists and other resource people that the Professional Fellows Program connected us with, but mostly after having experienced it myself during the fellowship in Wichita, Kansas, I can honestly say that I have my own understanding of what Community

Organizing is.

The experience in the field was the one that helped me a lot to reach that – I really enjoyed door-knocking, but even more the whole process of planning, conducting and disseminating campaigns. I would like to finish with an example that was brought to me by my wonderful host, Laura Dungan, who told me about her work with Shel Trapp, an example that best underlines the concept of Organizing that I perceived – in one of his books Trapp is photographed from the back on purpose, because it is not the organizer, but the people who are the ones that matter.”



*On May 8, 2015 Dilyana did volunteering at Kansas Food Bank in Wichita.*

### Zsanett Fugg – Szeged, Hungary

#### Internship with Jane Addams Senior Caucus, Chicago, Illinois



“I feel privileged that I could participate in this greatly empowering and enriching professional program. During the time I have spent in the United States, I established friendships within the delegation, but also with the staff members of my host organization and other professional partners in the U.S. that I have been working with in the past weeks. At Jane Addams Senior Caucus, Chicago, IL, during my professional fellows’ internship, I had the opportunity to not only observe, but practice efficient community organizing methods and tools.

I had the chance to see an organization working with seniors (which is extremely rare in Europe) and to be involved in the process of their work from the inside. I found many similarities between their work and my previous experiences in senior organizing. I have gained practical and useful knowledge and skills. I would like to express my thanks for this opportunity to WSOS, GLC and especially Elizabeth Balint for making this program possible. It has given me a lot both on the personal and professional side.”

### Slavomir Gal – Roznava, Slovakia

#### Internship with Granite State Organizing Project, Manchester, New Hampshire



“This fellowship has been one of the most interesting and enriching experiences I have ever had in my life. Not only have I learned so much when it comes to my profession and career, but it was very transformative from a personal point of view as well. I have met amazing people (Americans and Europeans) who showed me another perspective on various aspects of life.

I could experience their openness, helpfulness and hospitality. I had a chance to see the real professional work of community organizers, I was at the center of the action, I met people in the neighborhood and every single person I met during my stay was very unique and special, whether it was my host family, staff in the office or a homeless person on the street. This U.S. fellowship gave me the opportunity to improve professionally and personally as well. I feel blessed for having this opportunity. Thank you for giving me the chance to make this happen for me!”

### Ivana Raposova – Bratislava, Slovakia

#### Internship with Virginia Organizing, Charlottesville, Virginia



“My fellowship stay in the United States has been very precious to me. Not only have I learned community organizing, which was a rather new and unknown method for me prior to my enrollment in this program, but I also grew personally. I learned to trust myself more when it comes to proposing and realization of my visions, public speaking or simply sharing the personal story of my life. One of the main goals of community organizing is empowerment of the community. After seven weeks of meeting a variety of interesting personalities from all kinds of backgrounds, I became empowered myself. I believe this is the precise essence of community organizing - learning, growing and speaking up together.

Home-stays and rich cultural programs enabled me to look deeper into the shell of the the American culture. The diverse mosaic I found there I personally consider to be very appealing. All in all after seven weeks, I am leaving as a slightly different person than I came. Thank you very much for this opportunity.”

### Szilvia Nagy – Budapest, Hungary

#### Internship with Community Voices Heard, New York City, New York



“I had high expectations for my fellowship experience. After numerous trainings on community organizing back in Hungary, I was eager to see how it was done, and how the methodology was implemented day-to-day by community organizers. I expected to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of community organizing by meeting and learning from long-time organizers and experiencing first-hand the culture and community life. Also, I wanted to meet LGBTQ groups and organizations, get connected and learn about the local context. The Professional Fellowship Program gave me the opportunity to do all of these. Furthermore, I had the chance to meet amazing people, organizers, activists and other fellows who moved me, made me think and made me laugh. I have all the tools and support I need to start making a change in my own communities at home.”

### Florea Mihnea – Bucharest, Romania

#### Internship with Community Voices Heard, New York City, New York



“My New York professional fellow experience was extremely valuable in defining my community organizing understanding, and my LGBT-related knowledge of service and advocacy projects. It was a great experience on practical skills and learning opportunities and, with the help of CVH staff, I also managed to learn about local LGBT groups such as Heritage of Pride, GLSEN, The LGBT Community Center, Audre Lorde Law Project, Sylvia Rivera Project and so many more. The lessons learned here will help define my professional work as an LGBT activist and my plan to start community organizing with this group are already under way and have received seed funding for the first gay-straight alliance student club ever to be developed in Romania. For this, my U.S. experience has been very instrumental.”

*May 12, 2015, Highland Park, Brooklyn, New York: Mihnea and Szilvia took a part at Rally and March for Affordable Housing and Jobs event.*

*(L-R) Lorraine Knox, Mihnea Florea, Mo George, Sondra Youdelman and Szilvia Nagy.*



## Bence Pal – Budapest, Hungary

### Internship with The Seed House, Wichita, Kansas



“I came to the United States with the expectation to get a first-hand experience about community organizing and active citizenship, but I got more than that. At home I got the theory and methods, but here I got a better understanding on the mindset and approach itself and the very heart of soul of community organizing that works with the people - directly respecting their decisions. Before this trip I had a basic concept on community organizing, but this time I had the opportunity to witness the dynamics, and I got the answers to burning questions that I was seeking answers to. I really appreciate the opportunity to dive into this particular experience and allow me to broaden my mindset regarding doing community organizing work.”

*May 9, 2015, Wichita, Kansas: (L-R) Claudia, Dilyana, Bence and Monika volunteered to serve food at the Lord's Diner Soup Kitchen.*



## Claudia Popa – Brasov, Romania

### Internship with The Seed House, Wichita, Kansas



“The program provided me with practical examples on community organizing and it has helped me connect with local communities and its people, make new friends and develop relationships that may turn into future opportunities for my projects involving Roma communities in Romania. I have also discovered the real life beyond the screens and the incredible U.S. multicultural society together with its flavors.”

## Monika Jurikova – Bratislava, Slovakia

### Internship with The Seed House, Wichita, Kansas



“During my fellowship I have learned a lot about the American culture. I have understood that people living in the USA are very diverse, with different interests and needs. As I had an opportunity to stay in the Mexican community, I had a chance to get to also know their culture. I learned a lot about how the different organizations are working and what their approach towards community organizing is. I learned a lot, it was such an experience!”

## Sona Korenova – Bratislava, Slovakia

### Internship with Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Chicago, Illinois



“Thanks to WSOS, the Great Lakes Consortium and the U.S. State Department, I got a chance to grow both professionally and personally. I've got a better idea of what I could take back and try in my country. I shaped up as a professional in my field of work. It helped me to realize that I was trying too hard to do everything in my community, but forgot about involving the group that I could have the greatest impact with, not for.”

**Kirilka Angelova – Yakoruda, Bulgaria**  
**Internship with Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Chicago, Illinois**



“I found this fellowship to be a life and work experience. To engage and to involve, to see how people organized themselves for a better life, to see the people power, to feel the truly engagement of the community leaders, to understand more about USA life, to see all this amazing places, to have wonderful time with the group and all people who I met since I am here – great people, professionals and community organizers – this is priceless. I found all the programs very inspiring and interesting. I am very grateful and satisfied. This was a life-changing experience in a good way and of course a great opportunity. Thank you very much! It is never about us, it is about the community! With all my respect.”



*May 2015: Professional Fellows (L-R) Kirilka Angelova, Oana Bacil and Sona Korenova during their internship in Chicago, Illinois*

**Oana Bacil – Bucharest, Romania**  
**Internship with Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Chicago, Illinois**



“I was looking forward to learning as much as possible in the United States and so we did! We learned from our hosts, we learned from our mentors, we learned so much from every one of our speakers and most of all, we learned from one another. And what we learned was not just organizing techniques, not just structure and motivation, but we also learned how to appreciate our own work, how to value our resources and how to find strength in one another. I could not begin to express how grateful I am for having had this opportunity.”

**Cristinela Ionescu – Petrosani, Romania**  
**Internship with Virginia Organizing, Charlottesville, Virginia**



“I am happy to express my testimonial about the Professional Fellows Program. This gave me a more powerful learning experience to be an organizer with experience in community organizing in America. I have learned that the organizer is the friend of the community. The fundraising course introduced me to the donations issue. I can take this back to Romania and introduce it to my community. One important thing that I learned was to listen to people when they talk.

To try to change things is good, but here I learned there is a need to do it – so it really happens – you can make it happen.

Virginia Organizing made it possible for me to meet people that became my role model of a leader, artist and manager. It showed me how media makes it possible to grow the power. An Artisan Center for the people in my home town of Petrosani will be the perfect project to bring equal opportunities to my community. Thank you very much for the opportunity to participate in the Professional Fellows Program. In the name of the Roma community in Petrosani, we want to express our THANKS to the U.S. State Department, WSOS and the Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development.”



### Dr. Reka Szilardi – Szeged, Hungary

#### Internship with Granite State Organizing Project, Manchester, New Hampshire



“I came to the States to receive different kinds of information about how to organize people in specific ways. I can tell you that I learned a lot of things since I arrived, not only about community organizing, but about cultural and political things as well. It was a great time and I am very glad that I got this wonderful opportunity. My way of thinking and my perspectives have been changed in this past six weeks, especially on the topics of social change and social justice. I was given very useful trainings. I was able to look into a non-profit organization’s everyday life and see the process of their work. I think I will be able to use this knowledge to further my work in Hungary.”

### Szilvia Suri – Budapest, Hungary

#### Internship with One Northside, Chicago, Illinois



“Do not do things which can only be done by you because it means that that specific issue is not important for others. This was one of the most useful ideas I learned during my fellowship program. I had the chance to take part in meetings, actions and trainings where I could learn the most about community organizing, coalition building, fundraising and civil participation.

To involve and motivate people in actions, campaigns and events – you must know the self-interests of the people. A community organizer must keep doing one-on-ones every single day. On the other hand you must find and educate leaders and delegate tasks to them. The community organizers are not the main actors: we must step back and help the community from the background. Even if we see mistakes or failures, we must let the group learn from these.”

### Johanna Laszlo – Budapest, Hungary

#### Internship with Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, Chicago, Illinois



“I came here with the expectation of deepening my knowledge of community organizing, and reflecting on my work in my home country through the perspective of another culture. I wanted to learn about organizing methods which are new for me. I wanted to have professional discussions with experienced organizers, take part in the life of communities, and I wanted to be inspired. Now I feel this program gave me those things that I was searching for: I learned, watched, participated – and I was moved emotionally by the stories of those people I had the opportunity to work with. Meanwhile, I met kind and open-minded people who were interested

in my home experiences and helped me to have an insight into their culture.

Last but not least, I am strengthened in my recognition: although there is an ocean between my home continent and the United States and we have different cultures and languages, people are people. We all have struggles and the power, and if we know how to use this power, we can have victories in our daily life.”



*June 1, 2015, Hilton Garden Inn, Washington D.C.: The Hungarian team of 7 Professional Fellows (L-R) Szilvia Suri, Szilvia Nagy, Bence Pal, Zsanett Fugg, Reka Szilardi, Peter Petak and Johanna Laszlo holding Certificates of Completion presented by WSOS/GLC.*

**Maria Magdalena Ilie – Bucharest, Romania**  
**Internship with Jane Addams Senior Caucus, Chicago, Illinois**



“The Professional Fellows Program was the perfect combination between networking, knowledge transfer, understanding, social dynamics and change. I have learned a lot, made new friends, built relationships – bridges across the countries. I am grateful for this life changing opportunity.”

**Lenka Machlicova – Bratislava, Slovakia**  
**Internship with Pioneer Valley Project, Springfield, Massachusetts**



“I did not expect that during the exchange program I will learn so much about myself. I came here with open mind and with little information about community organizing. My reality was filled with the stories of the people living across the east side of the USA and their perception of their lives. I learned many things, but the following three I have identified as the most memorable and important ones. First, I learned that if I believe in my values in order to make them valuable, I need to stand up and make them public. Because someone out there will have the same values as I do and together we will make some change. In the past, for most of the time, I have kept my values and beliefs to myself, not having the feeling to share them or be vocal about them. Here, I have seen people openly telling who are they and about how they feel. I committed to myself that, when I will go back home, I will be not be afraid to share who I am. This is the first strong learning lesson that I will take back home.

Secondly, I learned about a power. Before I came here, I did not understand what the power means and how it operates. I was confused about the public officials shouting at me or closing the door before me while doing my work. At that time, I did not realize that what I was doing was threatening the power which I learned is more powerful than the power itself. I learned that different rules are applied in public and private areas and in order to succeed and be more effective in my life, it is important to distinguish these two worlds. Finally, I learned that there is no one single face of the USA. We crossed a number of states, met with extraordinary people and representatives of NGO’s, to learn that there is a lot of diversity and multiculturalism. I was blessed to be here and got a better understanding of the USA, the country of the many challenges and opportunities.”



*June 4, 2015, Professional Fellows Congress, Washington D.C.: (L-R) Nevena, Slavomir and Lenka holding certificates presented by the U.S. Department of State.*

**OUR SINCERE THANK YOU**

**To the U.S. Department of State Professional Fellows Program Division and U.S. Embassies in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia for generous support to our delegation!**