



“Sustaining Civic Participation in Minority Communities”

**Testimonies from the Fall 2015 Professional Fellows Delegation
from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia
visiting the United States in September 29 - November 13, 2015**



October 3, 2015, City of Toledo, Ohio - Inverness Club: Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur (in the middle) and 18-member Fall delegation of Professional Fellows from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia with Elizabeth Balint (first on the left)

THANK YOU TO LEADERS AND MENTORS FROM 11 HOST ORGANIZATIONS IN 6 DIFFERENT STATES ACROSS THE UNITED STATES:

Illinois: Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH); Community Renewal Society (CRS); Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR); Access Living Chicago (ALC); Go Bronzeville; Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Jane Addams Senior Caucus (JASC) in Chicago;

Michigan: Michigan United in Detroit; **West Virginia:** Step by Step in Charleston;

Minnesota: Neighborhood Organizing for Change (NOC) in Minneapolis;

New Hampshire & Vermont: United Valley Interfaith Project (UVIP)

FOR THEIR INTERNSHIP’S SUPERVISION AND HELP TO OUR DELEGATION!



*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*





Internship at Chicago Coalition for the Homeless in Chicago, Illinois

Antoaneta Bozhikova – Sofia, Bulgaria



“I learned a lot about community organizing during my U.S. fellowship trip. When I came to the United States and especially to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH), I didn’t have any idea that two most powerful things in this world are to organize people and organize money. But in every movement the most important and valuable asset is the people involved in the process. I was so happy that I had the chance to live and work in Chicago – the city where community organizing was born. For one month I had the opportunity to work with people from CCH and it was an amazing time for me. I had very different types of experience – we had one very good 3 day organizing training, we visited the shelters and we had the opportunity to speak with homeless people there and do one on ones with some of them, they shared their story with me and also we participated in a rally and action in Springfield. I learned many things about community organizing – what is it, what are the general principles, history and why people decide to do it, what motivates them to stand up and fight for their rights. Nobody is born as an organizer – but with practice you learn how you can become a very good one and also you must have the big heart to feel the injustice and to fight against it. I found out that the injustice, and feeling powerless are the main reasons why most of the people are started to do organizing. Everybody in their past has had some bad experience or some other issue which they couldn’t handle by themselves, but found out that people united by the same cause can make the difference needed to change the world. Determination and the desire for changes motivate all the people which I have had the opportunity to speak and work with during my fellowship. Thank you to the State Department, GLC and Chicago Coalition for the Homeless for everything that you trained and taught me. For me this month was very helpful to understand where my mistakes in the past came from and to learn that you always move on – learn from your mistakes.”

Zuzana Balazova – Skalica, Slovakia



“My fellowship gave me additional power to continue in my work. Now, I am more educated about organizing people and I learned to listen. After my fellowship I found out that sometimes it is very important to stand up and say “NO!”, “We do not agree!” “We want change!”, especially when we are speaking about Roma situation in Europe. I think Roma people need someone as Saul Alinsky was. There comes the time to create network of organizers, who will listen to Roma and respect them. Majority used to create world for Roma as majority wanted it to be. Slovak majority is not dealing with world of Roma as it is. I think this is the basic problem why Roma living situation is not going to be better and I learned how to motivate people and leaders. I will start to do agitation in Roma communities and with my organizing skills I will be able to help people to change their hard life position and fight against social injustice. My biggest weapon is power inside of Roma community. I know that I can mobilize this power to change our social status in the society and give better future to our children. Many thanks to the U.S. State Department, WSOS and Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development to be a part of this program.”



November 2, 2015: Antoaneta and Zuzana in Chicago, IL

Internship at Community Renewal Society in Chicago, Illinois

Antoaneta Nenkova - Sofia, Bulgaria



“The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee declared that our NGO is interested in using community organizing in our activities. That is why my work before and after the U.S. trip was and will be supported. The two-way exchange developed my professional skills and gave me a chance to explore diverse community organizing methods of two of most influential U.S. NGOs, based in Chicago - Community Renewal Society and Access Living. I hope that together with the teams of these organizations we created a lasting and sustainable partnership. Not only me but also my home organization will benefit from my new knowledge and experience in Bulgaria.”

Florin Nasture – Bucharest, Romania



“For sure this one month and half of fellowship in USA was a life experience for me. Besides the ideas, skills and methods that I gained during my fellowship the most important thing that I will bring back home is the commitment to community organizing and empowerment as the way of getting Roma out of the vicious circle of poverty. *“The world as it is not as I would like to be”, “Targeting people not institutions”, “Building trust and relationships by one on one”, “Community development is about relationship”, “Power is the ability to change”* are only a few of the concepts that change my understanding about community organizing. I really appreciate that the U.S. State Department and the Great

Lakes Consortium at WSOS gave me the opportunity to broaden my mindset about community organizing with the internship experience at Community Renewal Society in Chicago.”



Internship at Service Employees International Union in Chicago, Illinois

Monika Balint – Budapest, Hungary



“My stay in the United States, especially in Chicago led me to a deeper understanding of American democracy, society, and economics. This helps me to see a wider picture on challenges our countries are facing in this decade. I have seen and talked to amazing people who are fighting against economic and social injustice. At the SEIU Healthcare in Chicago I met low paid workers who became powerful leaders of their community and with their courage and skills helped to get

better work conditions, higher payments and they also fight for racial justice. When I return home I will do everything to mobilize unemployed people and low paid workers for better opportunities.”



October 12, 2015: Monika in Chicago, IL



Internship at Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Chicago, Illinois

Diana Nedeva - Sofia, Bulgaria



“My participation in the program was enriching and very useful in both personal and professional aspect. I could learn a lot about the U.S. as a country and its culture and also about the similar challenges we face. I could learn a lot by communicating with the staff and the volunteers at Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), the organization in Chicago, where I spent my one-month internship as well as during the time spent with my host family. We have similar interests and I am very grateful for the warm welcome and the nice moments with my colleagues, host family and their friends and relatives. Being present at direct actions, marches, conferences and staff meetings gave me a variety of experiences and chances to speak with different people who have very different opinion about the same thing. I am leaving the U.S. with new ideas and I believe that these will improve the projects I am working on in Bulgaria.”

Ciprian Galusca – Bucharest, Romania



“The U.S. Department of State Professional Fellows Program is a great opportunity to have a glimpse of the American way of life, culture and values. Spending almost one month in a city like Chicago was an amazing personal experience, in which I got to know and understand the nature of a multicultural city in America. Professionally, the time spent at my internship with Illinois Coalition of Immigrants and Refugees Rights organization is extremely valuable for me. I’ve learned a lot about community organizing, new methods of fundraising, how to build coalitions and strategies to push for social change and much more. This experience exceeded my expectation in any aspect that I imagined before I left my home and I am grateful and happy for meeting wonderful people that shared both professional know how and life stories.”



Internship at Jane Addams Senior Caucus in Chicago, Illinois

Gabriela Anghel – Bucuresti, Romania



“I came with the Professional Fellows Program without knowing very well what to expect. It was a deep learning opportunity for me, more intense than I was thinking it will be. I’ve learned new methods and instruments to use in community organizing, I gained cultural experience, I met many leaders from European countries and from United States and I listened to their stories and experiences, I found that America has its own problem and its own people struggling to resolve them and I discovered many new things about myself. Was a transformation experience overall and I think this is the most important thing. I learned with Jane Addams Senior Caucus how to work with your members and how to empower them, how to create leadership, how to do door knocking and good planning, how to prepare speeches with the seniors and to fight for their rights. I realized how important is it to build and maintain relationships and continue engage members in direct actions. What are the last words? – I am happy, empowered and energized!”

Internship at Go Bronzeville in Chicago, Illinois

Agnes Molnar – Debrecen, Hungary



“I came here to learn community organizing. But I learnt more than just a method. Social change is not something that you can reach in a week; “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.” For me it meant that I can vision a big picture, but I can’t make big steps forward to it and that’s what I also experienced practically. After one event during the internship I felt very disappointed about the direct action we did, unlike the American participants, who seemed very happy. I asked some of them why they are so happy, if nobody cared about what we did. And they answered that even if only one person changed his mind about the issue we won. They were right and that’s the thing that will motivate me at home. Not just the tools, the methods and good practices what I bring home, but another point of view that I will definitely use and share at home during my work in Hungary.”

Alexandrina Dinga – Iasi, Romania



“The Fellowship in the USA gave me a better understanding of the community organizing process because I had the opportunity to interact with leaders and community organizers from Chicago, who shared with me their experience, their principles and the practices they use in the community organizing process. Because of everything I have learned, I strongly believe that even in the communities with serious problems, community organizing can come up with solutions. My experience in USA has helped me understand the American culture and society. I find Americans very hospitable, friendly and welcoming. I’m going back home inspired and motivated to continue my activity in my community. I know that the most important joy a man can have is the one he gets from being a part of the changes that happen in the community where he lives with his family and friends. It has been one of the most fulfilling learning experiences for me, and it has helped me to grow personally and professionally. Thank you the ones who have made this dream come true.”



October 27, 2015: Agnes and Alexandra with Eddie S. Read, Chicago’s Leader and Activist for 34 years.



October 2015: Meeting with a career community organizer Harold Lucas and Mariah May at Bronzeville Visitor Information Center.



Internship at Access Living Chicago in Chicago, Illinois

Anett Csordas – Budapest, Hungary



“The U.S. Department of State Professional Fellows Program was my first direct encounter with the America and its 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 and being involved in disability advocacy, and we exchanged ideas and good practices. I feel honored and happy that I had the possibility to do my internship in Chicago at Access Living. I could learn from people who had a big influence with their work on achieving legislation, the disabilities Act, which is one of the best in the world. I learned how to build an advocacy organization, build coalition, how to resolve problems and fight for issues and organize actions. I believe I can use this knowledge to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities, to have their life without barriers.”

Stoyan Pavlov - Pazardzhik, Bulgaria



“During my internship I learnt something really important and this is the answer to the question “What is power?” Power but in terms of the people that organize themselves in order to defend their goals, there mission and vision for life. Power but in terms of leaders! Power but in terms of the people with disabilities! Power but in terms of the children, the different children that give sense to the life in one united world! Power but in terms of democracy! Thanks to the US State Department, the Great Lakes Consortium and Elizabeth Balint for choosing me, and letting me to be a part of this amazing program for community organizing!”



October 4, 2015 - Mercury Theater Chicago: Going to Performance “RING OF FIRE”, the music of Johnny Cash in Chicago. (L-R) Stoyan Pavlov, Diana Nedeva, Gabriela Anghel, Asen Mitkov, Blazhka Dimitrova, Zuzana Balazova, Peter Huray and Antoaneta Bozhikova.



Internship at Michigan United in Detroit, Michigan

Istvan Tamas Szenttamasi – Miskolc, Hungary



“My internship in the USA at Michigan United in Detroit gave me a marvelous opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and experiences on both community organizing or on social economy development. I was really lucky to have a chance to spend one month in Detroit, where serious economical and social problems induce new, creative and innovative community based economy development initiatives that cannot be found in other parts of the world. I learned that a critical number of small businesses can have a stronger and more positive impact on the economy and the society than multinational corporations, if they work economically and environmentally sustainable. I also learned that they can be sustainable, if they are built from the grassroots and developed on community needs and also investments from the market. I am thankful that I had the opportunity to learn all the community organizing skills and social economy development methods that were necessary to improve my project, and meet good practices about successful social enterprises. These experiences proved that the work I started in my community is worth to continue and convinced me that I have to work for transforming the Hungarian social economy into a community and market investment based, financially sustainable system since small businesses together can give more to society than most of the corporations.”

Step by Step, Inc.
DREAM. WORK. GROW.

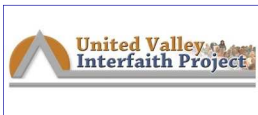
Internship at Step by Step in Charleston, West Virginia

Robert Furiel – Spisska Nova Ves, Slovakia



“A truly life-changing experience – that’s for me the easiest way to describe my experience in the U.S.A. I came to the U.S.A. eager to learn, to explore and to be surprised. The program not only met, but surpassed my expectations in so many ways. Being hosted by Michael Tierney from Step by Step, I got the chance to peek under the skin of the West Virginia society. I found many similarities with the Slovak society but also many differences and great deal of inspiration and encouragement in my work of LGBT organizer. My stay gave me hope that things can be changed for better even in the most rural and conservative environments – with the right attitude, specific tools and perseverance. I met people who filled my heart with joy, helped me rekindle my passion for social justice and social change and whose stories will fuel my activism for a long, long time. This program helped me understand the basic philosophy of community organizing and get it into my bloodstream. I also learned many practical application of this philosophy in rural areas, something that I’ll be able to apply in Slovakia. My participation in the Professional Fellows Program will have a profound impact on my activism back home and also on my life. Both were changed – for the better.”





Internship at United Valley Interfaith Project in New Hampshire and Vermont

Dana Trombitasova – Revuca, Slovakia



“I experienced not just magic of big cities, beauty of colorful nature, diversity of culture, hospitality of local people but also strong communities willing to fight for their rights and social justice, cooperation on local level and real bottom up effect actions. Everything what I have experienced in U.S. has a strong contribution to my personal and professional growth and taught me that community is able to stand up and by common effort sustainable development can be assured. I have learned how important are strong relationships in community and common help and how powerful personal stories of people are. People who I have met during my fellowship are for me big inspiration and their personalities and points of view enriched me in many ways. I am very thankful for this opportunity and for all the experiences and people which it brought to me.”

Blazhka Dimitrova - Sofia, Bulgaria



“It’s been almost 45 days since I arrived in the USA, 35 days since I started my internship in UVIP and almost a year since I wrote my pre-departure action plan. And all my perception has changed since then. I met people that expanded my mind, I saw ordinary people being honored for being PEOPLE. I saw what is a community and I myself became part of this community. Having six host families turned out to be one of the best things that happened. I managed to build long-lasting relationship with a variety of people. I realized that more than thirty people opened not only their homes, but also their hearts. I can’t even express how thankful I am for all that happened to me during last six weeks. I am now going back to Bulgaria with new knowledge, thanks to all the community organizers I met, all the trainers and, especially, Leah Torrey. I’m returning with new ideas I generated thanks to everybody who was so open to hear my story and to give me their feedback, with new friends and memorable moments. Colorful leaves, lovely dinners, being by the ocean with less than two hours to my flight, almost missing a bus, eating ice-cream served by me in an ice-cream house, doing interviews with elderly people, organizing an exhibition for more than a hundred people, cooking traditional and not so traditional meals, having dinner with people who were just released from prison, volunteering in a homeless shelter, playing with kids after schools, visiting amazing schools with inspiring principals, spending nights in a hot tub under the stars. Detroit, Toledo, Chicago, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts – all these and many other places touched my heart and changed me forever.”

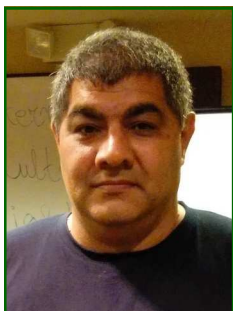


October 18, 2015: Dana and Blazhka in Claremont ready to join for some fun!



Internship at Neighborhood Organizing for Change in Minneapolis, Minnesota

Asen Yordanov Mitkov - Vidin, Bulgaria



“It has been a great challenge for me to be part of the program of the Great Lakes Consortium US State Department Professional Fellows Program. To meet people with different cultures, traditions, perceptions and ways of living was an adventure. I was so happy that I had the chance to live and work in Minnesota, the state of the 10 000 lakes. During this month I had the opportunity to work with people from Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC), Minneapolis. I had very different types of experience – I had attended a leadership school where I learnt techniques and methods how to recognize leaders among people; tools for phone banking and door to door. And the most but not the least is about the methods of fundraising! Thank you State Department, Great Lakes Consortium, Neighborhoods Organizing for Change and Elizabeth Balint for the opportunity to be part of this great program for community organizing!”



October 2015: Asen and Peter with a team of NOC - Neighborhoods Organizing for Change

Peter Huray – Skalica, Slovakia



“Thanks to WSOS, the Great Lakes Consortium and the U.S. State Department I was gifted to experience one of the best time of my life. By unforgettable 6 weeks I had a chance to experience real-life community organizing, I grew up in professional, personal and cultural ways. It was big chance for me to be involved in real work with communities, to see the best practices at the Neighborhood Organizing for Change in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to observe and learn from my mentors and their communities, to become part of it... Every single moment gave me a lot. Thanks to great host family I was given a chance to learn a lot about daily life of Americans and about their culture. I could compare the real life vs. information that I have had from media about the U.S. and their lives. I feel empowered, motivated, eager and willing to keep working within community organizing, as I now see how great meaning it does have. We can do great things, if we have relationships towards each other, mutual respect and willing to be the change we want to see in the world. I am looking forward to implement my gained knowledge, skills and attitudes into the practice of my working life and to impact my community by this experience!”



Amber Smock

Director of Advocacy & External Affairs, Access Living Chicago

"I would first like to say that I felt very lucky to host Anett Csordas from Hungary and Stoyan Pavlov from Bulgaria, and I know that my colleagues at Access Living, especially **Rodney Estvan**, felt the same way. They made such a positive impression that one of my staff said, *"They fit in so well they felt just like our own staff!"* That depth of response is rare for international exchange fellows at Access Living, although we tend to have overall positive experiences.



In organizing the Chicago visit for Anett and Stoyan, my goal was to show them the range of arenas in which Access Living operates to advocate for social change. Disability advocacy cannot afford to stay blinkered in a silo, and I wanted them to see our work from the grassroots to the sky, so to speak. Not only did they meet with a number of community organizers focused on disability rights, they met with state and city level officials whose specialty is disability rights enforcement, plus service providers who focus on serving people with disabilities. They visited six schools to see the reality of children with disabilities here, and attended the Board meeting of the Chicago Public Schools.



I work at a fast pace with many projects, and when Anett and Stoyan made it clear that they do the same in their home countries, I decided to simply fill their schedule with as many activities as possible as I would for myself, and just check in to see if it was becoming too much. Although at times they were tired at the end of the day, they were always open to new experiences and conducted themselves with professionalism, humility, affection and humor. I never had a sense of negativity from them, only a sense of adventure and progress. That spirit of adventure and progress (and hard work) is one of which the Professional Fellows should be very proud - it is the social justice ideal."



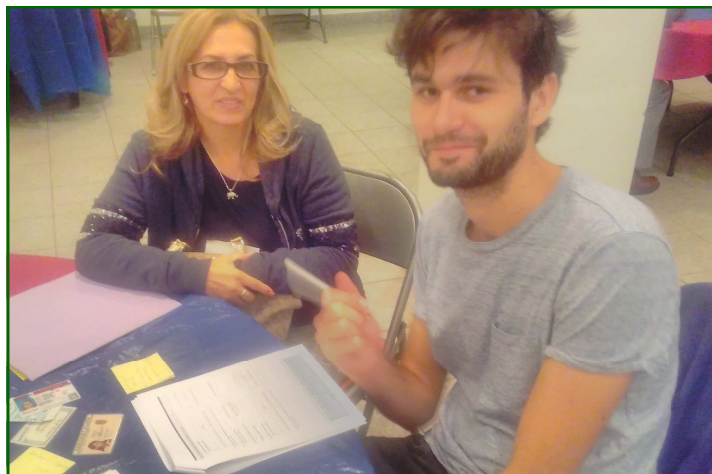
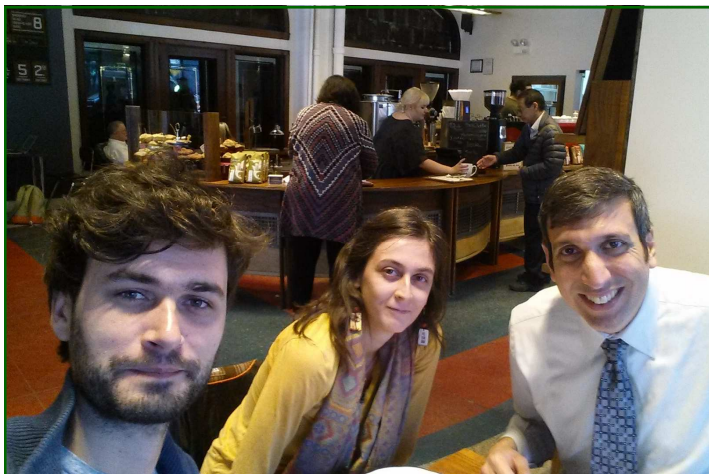
*Stoyan and Anett at the Access Living: (on the left) Meeting in the office;
(on the right L-R) with Amber Smock, Father Michael Bailey and Antoaneta Nenkova from Bulgaria.*



Jeff Pinzino

**Senior Director of Development and External Relations,
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights**

“The two fellows we had placed at the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights were extremely helpful. They, Diana Nedeva from Bulgaria and Ciprian Galusca from Romania, helped with a citizenship workshop, a state advocacy day, and a donor communication mailing. They participated in several organizational events and actions, and were much appreciated by staff.



My family hosted Diana Nedeva of the homestays, which was a wonderful experience for me and my family. Because the visit coincided with Halloween, our guest Diana got to participate in family celebrations surrounding the holiday (which they don't celebrate the same way in Bulgaria), including pumpkin carving and trick-or-treating with the kids. I know my kids had their minds opened by being exposed to someone from another part of their world, their customs, and friendship. It was an enriching opportunity for all involved.”

OUR SINCERE THANK YOU TO

**All Host Families, Business Partners and Trainers from 6 states of the United States
for their hospitality, generous assistance and support to our delegation!**

*Amber Smock, Anthony Shields, Branden Snyder, Carol Lee Lopez & her husband,
Carole Bekken, Christopher Patterson, Father Larry Dowling, Fatou-Seydi Sarr, Gisela Jones,
Jeanne Mayer, Jeff Pinzino & Katrina Pavlik, Leah Torrey, Lori Clark, Marc & Debora Willage,
Ronnie M. Harris, Tracy Koogler, Mark Fick & Roshani Saraiya, Michael Tierney,
Mike & Lois Neaton, Mike Griffin, Rebecca Noble, Rodney & Barbara Wendt, Rodney Estvan,
Romy Gringas, Tara Parrish and Sarah Jane Knoy.*

*Thank you to Antoaneta Bozhikova, Asen Mitkov, Peter Huray, Elizabeth Balint, Stoyan Pavlov
and all others whose photos are included in this publication!*

Gabriela Anghel Nameday Celebration, November 9, 2015



Robert Furiel Birthday Celebration, November 12, 2015



These celebrations were not only a great fun for everyone but also a celebration of newbuild friendship. Our Fellows are all united in a TEAM with great innovating ideas and ability to make a change!