



“Citizen Legislative Advocacy in Minority Communities” Testimonies from the 1st U.S. Mentors Delegation visiting Europe from July 8 — July 29, 2012



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**Mary Tarullo, Lakeview Action Coalition
Chicago, Illinois**

“This journey, which started months ago with our fellows visit to our organization, has opened up my world in myriad ways. We have forged relationships that, in some cases, I anticipate will allow for lifelong collaboration. In addition to these important connections, I have learned a lot about problems of racism, the economy, and the state of community organizing in Eastern Europe, as well as what organizing victories have been achieved. I look forward to bringing these stories back to my organization. We will do our best to incorporate some of these lessons into our work, and to support the organizing going on in Europe.”



**Monique George, Community Voices Heard
New York, New York**

“After 17 years of organizing this exchange program was a great way to expand my experience. It is easy to just do your work in the U.S. and not consider the rest of the world. This European visit showed me that the world needs change and as a community organizer I am committed to make that change. My new motto after this will be: - I will change the world and start with me. Thank you for this life changing experience.”



**Kirsten Dunham, Paraquad
St. Louis, Missouri**

“This exchange has been an amazing experience. I learned so much meeting and visiting with organizers and community members about the economic and political realities in Central and Eastern Europe. It is beneficial to share challenges, successes and strategies for community organizing. And of course I loved experiencing the culture, history, architecture and nature of Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Through this exchange I also have a better picture of the challenges to organize minority communities and the need of majority communities to address the racism toward and segregation of the Roma people.”



**Debra Martin, WSOS Community Action Coalition
Fremont, Ohio**

“This was an excellent learning experience for me and I feel that for whatever we contributed to the Central and Eastern Europeans’ learning, we took away as much or more. I’m sure that many of the connections that we made will last into the future and I feel re-energized to continue my work and to further develop the partnerships that we’ve formed.”



**Luke Allen, Metro Coalition of Congregations, Harriet Tubman Center
Detroit, MI**

“It’s a cliché, but traveling to Central/Eastern Europe was a life changing experience, both as a community organizer and as an American citizen. It was fascinating and inspiring, to learn about citizens building power in a brand new democracy, but also eye opening to see how strong the oppressive regimes of the past still weigh on their psyche, as well as the incredible level of discrimination and prejudice and a region the average American still knows far too little about. I leave feeling blessed to have the opportunity to come here and meet so many wonderful people, and reinvigorated about the importance of my work back in America.”



**Maria Trejo, Logan Square Neighborhood Association
Chicago, Illinois**

“I am surprised on how strikingly similar issues are being experienced in the States and in European countries. I have worked in community organizing for the past 13 years and have come a long way to have the opportunity to have participated in a program that has brought together many community organizers fighting on issues that surprisingly are common to our issues and struggles in the States. We are constantly dealing with housing, education, immigration, discrimination, health, and basic human rights. Having participated in my second international exchange experience as an individual has certainly made me more aware and conscious with an eye-opening experience of the struggles that great leaders endure on a daily basis. This exchange has introduced me to new foreign policies, communities of minorities of Europe, non-governmental organizations, and a great group of motivated organizers working for the rights of other individuals or communities. My participation has allowed me to discover new learning experiences and alternative techniques of organizing. I am now motivated to further my personal development to greater heights returning to the States and speaking to different organizations about my experience and how we can help each other globally as a community. The European fellows that came to the States are very inspirational, energizing, and hopefully returned with lots of ideas from all the organizations that they participated around the U.S. There was a well-balanced composition of participants that contributed to the interesting discussions and exchanges. I have gained a lot of knowledge through our tours in Europe which were highly inclusive.”



**Cathy Woodson, Virginia Organizing
Charlottesville, Virginia**

“Being a member of the U.S. delegation in the exchange program provided opportunities to experience diverse cultures in Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia. I was especially interested in the Roma community and how its culture is included in the Central European culture. It has been especially interesting to view the historical experience of being an African American and listening to the Roma issues and experience. I am gaining a better understanding of the organizing challenges in Central Europe and the similarities to the organizing in the U.S. I also learned how citizen participation is defined, the fears of community members and the influence of living with different political experiences.”



**Janice Johnson, Virginia Organizing
Hampton, Virginia**

“My experiences and observations as an African American participant in the European exchange program who visited Hungary, Bulgaria, and Slovakia. I observed many parallels between my experiences as an ethnic minority and those of the Roma in each of these countries. There are many admirable efforts to resolve the “Roma Issue”, but “Roma Inclusion” remains elusive. This is the ultimate challenge in our cooperative work. It has been interesting to learn the history of each of the countries and their efforts to transition to a more democratic society.”



***U.S. Mentors in Szeged, Hungary
(L-R) Cathy Woodson, Deb Martin, Mo George,
Kirsten Dunham, Julia Bertalan, Maria Trejo,
Mary Tarullo, Luke Allen and Jay Johnson.***



**Julia Bertalan, Friends for European Community Organizing Network (ECON)
Toledo, Ohio**

“Having the opportunity to come to Europe to learn from and meet amazing people and organizations has been incredible. It is essential that people and grassroots organizations are connected a crossed oceans in order to make real change in this world. We often get bogged down in our own community issues, and forget that similar things are happening all around the world. Exchanges like these can only strengthen our work on both ends. It has been interesting to learn about history and current political situations in this part of the world. Through this, I know that community organizing can be a powerful tool to bring the voices of the people to the forefront. It is working already and it will continue to grow. Over all this experience has been amazing, and I know that the relationships I have begun to build will continue to build democracy on both sides of the ocean.”