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# Maryland Commission for Women

A Commission of the Maryland Department of Human Resources

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## Maryland Commission for Women Travels to Moldova

In the fall of 2016, the offices of the Maryland Commission for Women (MCW) hosted a Professional Fellow from the Republic of Moldova. In the spring of 2017, two delegates from the MCW visited Moldova for a week.

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the Professional Fellows Program (PFP) is administered by the American Councils for International Education for the nations of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The PFP affords promising young professionals from developing democracies the opportunity to gain practical experience in and exposure to U.S. government, innovation ecosystems, and other fields depending on their professional background. (<http://professionalfellows.americancouncils.org/>)

Nighina Azizov, Chief of Staff to the Deputy Speaker of Parliament in the Republic of Moldova, worked as a Professional Fellow in the office the Maryland Commission for Women from October 17 to November 11, 2016. During this time she helped with several of the Commission's projects including the Voices of Maryland Women Listening Tour, and helped organize and staff a session of the Tour in Prince George's County.

Each professional fellow working in this country is required to develop an "outbound project" proposal, detailing how they would implement what they have learned during their experience here back in their home country, if they could bring a representative of the U.S. (typically their PFP supervisor) back for a week or so. Ms. Azizov's proposal was to develop a "Voices of Moldovan Women" Listening Tour in her homeland, bringing the MCW Executive Director and a co-chair of the Listening Tour Committee to consult on the initiative. The project was approved, and funded by the American Councils. Commissioner Yun Jung Yang and Executive Director Judith

Vaughan-Prather visited Moldova March 30 – April 5, 2017.

Background (excerpted from (<http://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/moldova>):

*“One of Europe’s poorest countries and a former Soviet Republic, landlocked Moldova is a parliamentary republic of roughly 3.6 million people, with another 400,000 living in the breakaway region of Transnistria. An estimated half of its 1/4 million workforce work abroad, their remittances accounting for at least a quarter of the nation’s GDP.*

*“While Moldova has made international and national commitments to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, by ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and various ILO Conventions, implementation lags. Women still face discrimination and inequality in social, economic and political life and their representation in Moldovan politics and decision-making remains below international benchmarks.*

*“Women in Moldova face specific education and labor market barriers. Persistent patriarchal attitudes limit their educational choices and employment options. Women also face discriminatory practices. These include significant wage disparities, segregation into lower-paying occupations, unequal sharing of work and family responsibilities and limited access to childcare. Women entrepreneurs face barriers getting access to bank loans and state-funded business and entrepreneurship development programs.*

*“Violence against women in Moldova is serious and widespread. Commissioned by the UN in Moldova in 2011, the study “Violence against Women in the Family” conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, found that 63 per cent of women experienced psychological, physical or sexual violence from their husband or partner and one in 10 experienced economic violence at least once. Rural, elderly and separated or divorced women had the highest rates of multiple types of violence.”*

During their visit, Yang and Vaughan-Prather met with **Mrs. Palihovici, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament** at the House of Parliament and then traveled with her to the **State University of Moldova** where they made a joint presentation on women’s issues in the U.S. and in Moldova and how Commissions for Women address those issues in the U.S. to a class of 60 students and faculty in the department of Political Science, in Chisinau.





They then visited **La Strada**, an organization that offers social services, legal representation and legislative advocacy for victims of human trafficking, domestic and sexual violence, where they met with the director. The organization provides training for judges and for flight attendants (to help them recognize signs that a passenger may be a victim of human trafficking), provides a 24-hour “Trustline,” peer-to-peer training, and other advocacy services.



On Sunday morning, April 2, Commissioner Yang and Executive Director Vaughan-Prather helped launch the **Voices of Moldovan Women Listening Tour** by staffing its first public forum in the village of Puhoi. The event was hosted by the mayor of the village and was held at the village high school. It was attended by 65 women who, after an initial reluctance,

eagerly shared their concerns, as women, mothers, workers and members of their communities. Altogether they identified 21 issues, ranging from environmental concerns to domestic violence.

In addition to the mayor, the event was attended by the director of the school, an assistant to a Member of Parliament, a member of the District Council and a village councilmember.



On Monday, April 3, the delegation visited the **Casa Marioarei**, a non-governmental organization providing long-term shelter for victims of domestic violence and their children, where the director provided a tour and discussed the challenges facing the residents and the organization, which is a model of wrap-around services to this population, including housing, job training, counseling, and other support services.



Later that day, they met at the **U.S. Embassy in Chisinau** with embassy staff and staff of the Professional Fellows Program in Moldova. They then visited the offices of the **U.N. Women in Moldova**, meeting with staff and the Country Director. U.N. Women works to advance women’s participation and leadership in decision-making structure, both private and public, advocates policies to combat violence against women, and supports the economic empowerment of women.

On April 4, they met with the **International Republican Institute (IRI)**, discussing women’s empowerment and the role of women in public life. The IRI encourages and trains women to run for public office, working with all political parties.



That evening, they made a formal presentation and participated in a round table discussion at a meeting of the **Moldova Chapter of the International Women Democracy Network**, including the local chapter of LeaderSHE (a young women leaders academy) and the Civil Society Advisory Group at the Ministry

of Agriculture, again discussing women’s empowerment and the role of women in public life.

Later that evening, they met with actress and women’s rights activist **Mihaela Strambeanu**. She is a national celebrity in Moldova and has used her fame to further advocacy for women’s issues, especially raising awareness of violence against women.

At almost every meeting following the Listening Tour session in Puhoi, Ms. Azizov was congratulated on the success of the initiative, and by the next day, she had already received an invitation from another mayor asking her to bring the Listening Tour to his village. Staff at the Embassy and the UN Women all expressed support for that project.

The Outbound component of the Professional Fellows Program emphasizes the exchange of information, resources and strategies for addressing issues. It is always hoped that the Professional Fellow will bring back specific ideas that can be implemented in her home country. In this case, Ms. Azizov is actively exploring the possibility of implementing at least five initiatives she experienced while working in the offices of the Maryland Commission for Women:

1. Initiation of the Voices of Moldovan Women Listening Tour (already in process)
2. Development of an alert system similar to the Amber Alert she experienced in Maryland to make it possible for the public to help police find missing children quickly (Mrs. Palihovici has introduced legislation to make this possible.)
3. Establish a Women of Tomorrow Award program in Moldova to recognize young women with records of academic excellence, community service and exceptional leadership
4. Establish a Commission for Women, or possibly several Commissions for Women in Moldova
5. Support for local women-owned businesses (Ms. Azizov modeled this practice by identifying a woman-owned catering service to use as the vendor for both the first session of the Listening Tour and for the final roundtable meeting with the International Women's Democracy Network.)

Finally, we have established a relationship that will last far beyond the week-long visit to Moldova. We are staying in touch via email and Facebook, and have already shared documents and templates to help Ms. Azizov as she continues her important work.