

Santa Clara County-Moscow partnership improves lives of youth

Santa Clara County, California is working with its sister county, the Region and City of Moscow, Russia, to better the lives of hundreds of youth who are without parental care. The sister county partnership has over the past four years, through exchanges and initiatives, furthered extensive collaboration in the social services arena.

In November 2012, the County of Santa Clara/Moscow Sister County Commission, along with the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, U.S.-based NGO EMQ FamiliesFirst, and Russia-based NGO Big Change Charitable Foundation (Bolshaya Peremena) launched the "Building Bridges Project." The Project is funded by a \$57,000 grant from the US-Russia Civil Society Partnership Program implemented by the Eurasia Foundation.



As part of the Project, a 12-member delegation from Moscow, including key representatives from the city's social services as well as NGOs, and led by grant partner Bolshaya Peremena, visited Santa Clara on a week-long mission. The Project was aimed at providing Moscow with tools to help transform their orphanage care system into a foster care system.

The Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, a leader in foster care system transformation, worked with the support of EMQ FamiliesFirst to provide the Moscow delegation with on-site visits and training. The delegation was introduced to an innovative approach to provide support for foster care children that is community-based and focused on independent living skills, resourcing, and employment. In a reciprocal learning environment, the Moscow delegates provided Santa Clara County social workers with cultural competency training to help them in their work with Russian children and families in California.

The partners and delegates found the exchange to be extremely productive. Julia Yudina, Director of Change One Life, Moscow says, "The trip was really inspirational. It was great to meet other people working in the NGO world who show so much care and compassion for children and their wellbeing. I was impressed with the innovative ideas used by the people we visited to reunite children with their family members. In 2013, I will be taking some of these ideas and implementing them in my organization in Russia."

The Santa Clara-Moscow sister county partnership has a history of cooperation in the social services arena. The Building Bridges Project itself has its roots in the Open World Delegation hosted by the County of Santa Clara/Moscow Sister County Commission in October 2009. The Commission, under the leadership of Commissioners Sergey Savastouk and Nancy Madison, was awarded a \$7,000 grant from the Open World Program, a congressionally-funded program, to host a social services delegation. The Commission worked with Ms. Irina Ryazanova, Executive Director of Bolshaya Peremena, to both nominate delegates and identify the type of program that would be most beneficial to the social services delegation.



Ms. Olga Klimkina, Director of Moscow's Center of Social Help to Children, was a member of the 2009 delegation. Applying the lessons learnt from the visit, in March 2011, she initiated a first of its kind program in Moscow to provide services and counseling to graduates of orphanages as they transition into independent living. It was modeled after Santa Clara County's Independent Living Program. She also made additional enhancements based on a follow up visit to Santa Clara County when the County of Santa Clara/Moscow Sister County

Commission hosted her in 2011 during which she learned about Santa Clara County's new HUB facility, a youth-led and organized community center dedicated to supporting current and former foster youth ages 15 to 24 years.

Back in the U.S., for her third visit, as part of the November 2012 delegation, Ms. Klimkina gave a talk on the incredible success of Moscow's new independent living program and how it continues to support Moscow's youth. Four more program centers are now open in different districts of Moscow, with a total of 32 such centers planned.

In January this year, the County of Santa Clara/Moscow Sister County Commission was awarded another Open World Program grant, the third so far, to host a delegation in September 2013 focused on services for youth. The Commission, Bolshaya Peremena, and Ms. Klimkina are keen on continuing programs in this sector. They will work together to identify delegate nominees and create a week-long program that will enhance the social services activities and relationship the sister county partners have developed over the last four years. Commissioner Madison adds, "We look forward to advancing the mission of the County of Santa Clara/Moscow Sister County Commission and expand on what we've already accomplished."

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