

Report for the US State Department on ABLE Project, September 2012

The American Bulgarian Library Exchange

Success and Growth

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The American Bulgarian Library Exchange (ABLE) grew out of the ALA Fellows Program, jointly sponsored by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the American Library Association (ALA). The Colorado State Library was pleased to host Iskra Mahailova, then a staff member at the Bulgarian National Library. Subsequent country visits of Bulgarian and US librarians led to a successful grant funded by the US State Department that became ABLE.

ABLE had four major goals:

- Bulgarian libraries would meet community information needs through the establishment of community information centers (CIC).
- Bulgarian government and community leaders would increase support of Bulgarian libraries.
- Partner libraries would be created between Bulgarian and US libraries in Colorado and Iowa.
- Bulgarian libraries would develop a continuing network to seek funding to upgrade their libraries' computer capacity.

Project activities included extensive country visits (approximately 20 librarians from each country visited their partner), meetings with public officials in both countries, presentations to librarians and community groups, workshops on creating a CIC, and ongoing communication.

Bulgarian librarians responded with dedication, enthusiasm, and creativity. Bulgarians returning from their US visits started new programs in their home library. BLIA (then ULISO) created a national Advisory Committee with leaders from the US and Bulgaria and sponsored the first National Library Week and the first National Library Day with an exhibit on the modern library. Twelve librarians trained in how to establish a CIC, in turn, trained over 900 librarians. The ABLE project evaluation showed that the publicity about libraries and the activities the libraries had conducted had resulted in increased staffing, resources, computers, and support for the libraries.

Overall, ABLE allowed participating Bulgarian libraries to show their ability to learn new information, apply and integrate it into Bulgarian library service, and bring positive attention to the contribution of libraries to Bulgarian society. After the ABLE project ended, Bulgarian libraries continued partnerships, created ones with libraries in other countries, and began to meet with each other to share information about their programs and plans.

I believe that the success of the ABLE project, the continued growth of Bulgarian libraries after the grant, and the recognition of the change in Bulgarian libraries, led the selection of Bulgaria for a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Global Libraries Grant, and the investment by the Gates Foundation of millions of dollars in Bulgarian libraries. The US State Department can be proud of its investment in Bulgarian libraries.