East meets West: Russians visit USU to study children's services

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By Kevin Opsahl The Herald Journal

Left: Director of Sound Beginnings Preschool Kristine Blaiser, far left, speaks with Russian Delegates, from left, Mariya Andreyeva, Natalya Shulzhenko, and Interpreter Boris Leikin at USU Tuesday. The delegates were visiting the preschool to learn about services provided to children with disabilities. (Jennifer Meyers/Herald Journal)

Five Russian leaders visited Utah State University on Tuesday as part of a week-long trip examining foster care issues.

While in Logan and during an additional stop in Salt Lake, the delegates learned more about services offered for children who are in foster care, support available to foster parents and local governmental views on caring for young children.

Yesterday, the delegates took a tour of the Sound Beginnings program at USU to explore what services are being provided for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The program is housed in the Emma Eccles Jones Early Childhood Education and Research building. They even passed out chocolates to the kids.

"It was very interesting to be at this center," said Natalya Vladimirovna Shulzhenko, teaching assistant at Udmurtia State University, through a translator. "Especially (to hear) about cochlear implants and how they implant them and how they use them."

The delegates are interested because they are considering how to transition services from an orphanage-based to a foster care system in their country, said Vonda Jump, senior research associate at the Early Intervention Research Institute.

The New York Times profiled a Russian orphanage this year, reporting that government officials in the county have "begun to acknowledge how troubled their (orphanage) system is."

The chairwoman of the parliamentary committee on family and children, Yelena B. Mizulina, spotlighted what she said was a shocking statistic: Russia now has about 700,000 orphans, which is more than at the end of World War II when an estimated 25 million Soviet citizens were killed.

USU is hosting the delegation for Open World Program, managed by the independent Open World Leadership Center at the Library of Congress. It lets Eurasian political and civic leaders work with their U.S. counterparts and experience American-style democracy.

Vasyura Svetlana, associate professor of general psychology at Udmurtia State University, said through a translator the program is a great way for universities to "exchange experiences" and "learn from each other."

The Open World Leadership Center awarded a grant to Utah State University to administer this and similar exchanges in 2010. The last time USU had a foreign delegation visit was in 2008.

"We're very interested in keeping our global awareness around what's happening for young children," Jump said.

The other Russian delegates are: Mariya Vladimirovna Andreyeva, assistant professor in educational psychology, Udmurtia State University; Natalya Vasilyevna Fadeyeva, director of Psychological & Counseling Services Center; Elvira Ilfatovna Latypova, head of the Division of Children Services, Udmurtia Republic Committee on Family and Population, and Irina Garriyevna Kuznetsova, facilitator and translator.

On Tuesday, they also discussed city governance issues with Jay Monson, chairman of the Logan Municipal Council.

Their itinerary on Monday included a visit to the Child and Family Support program and a panel discussion with foster parents. For fun, they were also treated to tours of Logan Canyon and Bear Lake.

In Salt Lake City, the delegates will visit LDS Family Services, the Division of Child and Family Services, have a roundtable discussion with the Utah Foster Care Foundation and attend a Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsal.