

PILP Hosts Russian Activists



On June 4, 2014, the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project met with 5 Russian Human Rights Activists at the behest of the US Department of State International Visitor Leadership Program. The group was interested in learning about best practices of nonprofit organizations such as the PILP. They also were interested in exchanging ideas and techniques that increased self-sufficiency and sustainability. They also expressed an interested in joint international projects between the PILP and themselves. Finally they were interested in our sources of funding.

Angus Love began the meeting with an overview of our work. Dmitry Rozhin, an attorney expressed interest how our prison system operates. Angus briefed the group on the strange juxtapositioning of inmate rights and mass incarceration. While we house 25% of the world's incarcerated population, we are one of only a few countries that recognize inmate rights under our constitution. Dmitry asked if inmates could vote as they do in Europe and as he is advocating in Russia. Angus explained that only pretrial detainees and released prisoner can vote. Dimitry described his interaction with the European Court which vindicated his rights and awarded damages in a local dispute. Angus voiced regret that the USA is not a member of the European Court.

Sergei Beliaev discussed the Russian prison system that still contains remnants of the Stalinist era. He noted that longer term inmates are sent to prisons in the considerable northern regions and that conditions in such facilities are harsh. He inquired as to Pennsylvania's place in the larger picture of

corrections policies in the USA and Angus responded that we aren't as harsh as Texas or Florida but much harsher than most states. The death penalty was also discussed and Angus noted that Pennsylvania is very aggressive in seeking the penalty but reluctant to carry it out. He noted that the only 3 executions in the last half century were volunteers. Russia rarely utilizes the death penalty and is currently under a moratorium against its application.

Su Ming Yeh asked Tatiana Vinnichenko about LGBT rights in Russia. Ms. Vinnichenko runs a human rights organization that provides social and legal services to the LGBT community. Su Ming noted the recent successes with regard to gay marriage and other LGBT issues. Tatiana noted that it was a crime to be gay in Russia until 1993 and is still subject to much discrimination. She presented a dark picture of gay rights in Russia.

After two hours of discussion, the group explored possible collaborations and contact information. All agreed that it was a worthwhile experience and wished each other well in promoting human rights in our respective societies.