



## SUCCESS STORY

# Community Connections

### Woman Leader Shares U.S. Experience



*Roza Zhumaeva, Deputy Head of Naryn District and USAID Community Connections alumna, speaking at presentation on her U.S. experience.*

*Photo: Community Connections*

**Theme:** Overcoming Contemporary Challenges in Islam for Professional Women

**From:** Kyrgyz Republic

**Dates of the Program:** July 18- August 8, 2008

**U.S. Host Organization:** International House of Metrolina, Charlotte, North Carolina

#### Success

Ms. Roza Zhumaeva, Deputy *Akim* (District Government Administrator) of Naryn Rayon, Kyrgyz Republic, travelled to fifteen remote mountainous villages to share her U.S. experience gained as a participant of the USAID Community Connections program. As a result of her efforts to disseminate her impressions of professional and cultural life in the U.S., thousands of Kyrgyz citizens from remote villages have benefited from an alternative viewpoint on topics such as U.S. contemporary society, multiculturalism, religious diversity, freedom of faith, democracy, family values, and women's rights.

#### Overview

In remote areas of Kyrgyz Republic, people are not well-informed about U.S. society, culture, and professional life. Most people rely on Russian mass media sources that often negatively represent U.S. topics. The USAID Community Connections program provides opportunities for Kyrgyz Republic professionals to exchange experience with professionals working in their sphere of work and to learn about U.S. culture.

Within three months of her return from the U.S., Ms. Zhumaeva organized a series of presentations on her U.S. experience for the communities of her region, Naryn, which is the most mountainous in the Kyrgyz Republic. She and her fellow Community Connections participants, including District Imam Azatbek Orunaliev and representatives of NGOs, the Women's Council, Council of *Aksakals* or Honored Elderly People, Youth, and local government, travelled to fifteen remote mountainous villages where they shared their first hand impressions about U.S. life.

Ms. Zhumaeva's participation in the three-week program in the USA has had a profound impact on her thinking on a number of topics. "Thanks to the USAID Community Connections program, I have become more tolerant towards all followers of religious confessions. Before visiting the USA, my attitudes to those Kyrgyz who did not follow Islam were negative. Now, I see it is as freedom of faith."

Ms. Zhumaeva also noted the importance of professional and cultural exchange and the value of participants' alternative views on their experience in filling the information vacuum on the U.S. in the Kyrgyz Republic. "I also learned that information warfare between the U.S. and Russia misleads ordinary people. The Community Connections program should continue since it provides a chance for more people to see the real American society. ... As the Kyrgyz proverb says, 'Better to see once than to hear a hundred times'."