As Kazakhstan continues to develop economically, it also continues to develop its civil society sector, and in particular organizations focused on improving the lives of those living with HIV. HIV is a worldwide pandemic, and it will take the effort of every country’s government, working with civil society and healthcare institutions, to prevent its spread and to assist those infected.

USAID sponsored a first-hand study program to introduce participants to U.S. best practices in providing services to people living with HIV. The group met with over 15 organizations that shared innovative approaches for reducing social stigma and discrimination.

Gulsum Kikbayeva works for the Almaty Regional AIDS Center where she leads the HIV Infection Surveillance Department. The Center is one of many such centers in Kazakhstan where, as of January 1, 2013, the cumulative number of HIV infected people was 19,961, with a national prevalence of 86.8 per 100,000 population. Gulsum's responsibilities with this Center include epidemiological monitoring, outreach activities to at-risk groups, and research and analysis.

When Gulsum heard about the U.S. study opportunity, she was excited to learn more about HIV palliative care, services and treatment for people living with HIV in rural areas, services and treatment for children living with HIV, social support, attracting positive media coverage to address stigma and discrimination, and about medical care in the U.S. in general.

Ten participants spent three weeks in Chicago living with local families and visiting a range of HIV organizations and health care services, including the AIDS Foundation and Chicago House.

Upon return from the program, Gulsum made a presentation for 30 of her colleagues at the AIDS Center, providing information on the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S., the epidemiological situation in Illinois, HIV and pregnancy, and laws that protect people living with HIV. Gulsum and other participants are also preparing larger initiatives inspired by their visit such as the formation of a coalition that will work to reduce stigma and discrimination.

