

STATEMENT

by

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to the

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

*“A National Security Crisis: Foreign Language Capabilities
in the Federal Government.”*

2:30 p.m. May 21, 2012

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 342

Good afternoon. It is an honor to be here to share my NSLI-Y experience. My name is Michelle Dressner, I live in Bethesda, MD, and studied Russian in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia for the 2010 fall semester. I am currently a student at Smith College studying Russian. I am grateful to the U.S. Department of State for this life-changing opportunity.

I have always been an adventurer. I enjoy puzzles, exploring, and learning new things. These qualities led me to apply for the National Security Language Initiative for Youth. When I applied, I had been studying Russian in high school for two years. In my high school Russian class, there were forty students ranging from levels one through six. The atmosphere was independent learn-at-your-own pace, and I although I studied diligently; I still found it difficult to improve my language skills to a conversational level. I decided that the ideal way to learn language was through immersion, so I was encouraged by my Russian teacher to pursue study abroad programs. In my senior year of high school, I applied for NSLI-Y, a scholarship funded by the United States Department of State. When I

won a semester NSLI-Y scholarship to study Russian in Nizhniy Novgorod, Russia, I was ecstatic. However, I had no idea how immensely NSLI-Y would change my perception of culture, language, and study abroad and shape my educational and career aspirations.

During my time in Russia on my American Councils implemented NSLI-Y program, I lived with a host family. On my first day with my host family, they were unsure of how to behave around me, how to speak to me, and even how to feed me. Bread? Pancakes? Soda? What do Americans eat for breakfast? Unfortunately, my ability to communicate was limited to prepared phrases I learned in high school Russian classes and at my pre-departure orientation. I knew how to say hello, goodbye, please, thank you, and “very tasty.” “Very tasty” was helpful in relation to the food issue. However, I felt unable to communicate my emotions and learn more about the family kind enough to keep me as their guest for a semester. I wanted so badly to speak to them and tell them how grateful I was for their generosity and hospitality. My host family inspired me to learn Russian. Before NSLI-Y, learning language was simply a challenging exercise. Living in a Russian home made my reason for language learning personal and emotional.

My goal to communicate in Russian was achieved through practice speaking with my family, practice around the city, and my studies at the Nizhniy Novgorod Linguistics University. At university, I received intensive language lessons for four hours each day. The lessons were with my group – five American NSLI-Y students. Our professors, Natalia and Svetlana, put an unbelievable amount of effort into teaching us Russian. We practiced our speech, writing, grammar, and phonetics. They enthusiastically taught us complex aspects of the language, persistently and encouragingly explaining each of their lessons. Through these intensive lessons, I quickly became able to express myself. My host mother

was delighted when I asked her about her day and told her about a poem I was reading – all in Russian.

When I returned to the United States, I missed Russia very much. My friends, professors, and host family had inspired me. Before NSLI-Y, I was hesitant to study Russian in college, afraid that it would not be the right path for me. After returning from Russia, I was confident that I not only wanted to study Russian in college, but that I wanted to pursue a career involving Russia and international relations. In 2014, I will be receiving a degree from Smith College with a double major: Russian Civilization and Economics. I hope to work in public service for either the US Department of State, a sector of the Federal Government, or a nonprofit business or organization. By pursuing a career involving public service and Russia, I know that I am pursuing a career that I will love. My NSLI-Y experience opened my eyes to a new language – unlocking the key to learning a new culture. I now know that by studying Russian aiming for a career involving Russia, I will be studying and working in a field that I am passionate about.