

Community News



Elizabeth Ziemba, director of SHARED, Inc., in her Brookline office

SHARED, Inc. Focuses on Long-term Change in Armenia's Health Care

By **Daphne Abeel** *Mirror-Spectator* Staff

BROOKLINE, Mass. - In 2002, attorney Elizabeth Ziemba founded SHARED, Inc., a non-profit organization whose goal is to improve access to medicines and vaccines to the world's poorest people. One of SHARED's current top priorities is Building a Healthy Armenia Project in collaboration with the Deliver Project, based in Armenia. In partnership with USAID and John Snow, Inc. (JSI) the goal is to transform the health care delivery infrastructure.

Ziemba, who received a master's degree public health and management method in international health in 2001 from Boston University's School of Public Health, said, "What we want to do is to fundamentally change the health care system rather than concentrate on one particular issue. We are looking at the healthcare system as a whole."

Armenia has a limited health insurance program, which serves only a small segment of the population

Said Ziemba, "Some people are served by the Ministry of Health, but many if not most are expected to payout of pocket for private visits to doctors and for prescriptions."

SHARED's basic research will focus on determining which medicines are actually available, their expiration dates, the specifics of people's needs and tracking outbreaks of specific diseases.

The Deliver Project in Armenia with USAID and JSI are conducting a study for the establishment of a logistics management information system, working with organizations in Armenia to determine how health

care is or isn't delivered.

"Of course, we are not the only organization working in the health field," said Ziemba. "There are several NGO organizations such as Armenia Fund and the United Methodist Committee on Relief that are also dealing with medical care. They get some donations of medicines and drugs from pharmaceutical companies, but they are at the mercy *of* what donors are willing to give. They may not provide what is needed."

When medicines are donated that are not needed, according to Ziemba, the government has to store them and often has to pay to destroy them when they are not used or they pass their expiration date.

Said Ziemba, "It is expensive to destroy these medicines and the government shouldn't be using money in this way. We would work to reduce the number of inappropriate donations. The World Health Organization has guidelines and most pharmaceutical companies are trying to comply with needs, but we would improve that process."

SHARED's most immediate goal is to raise \$20,000 by the end of July to complete the research being undertaken by a team of Armenian medical and high tech professionals to determine Armenia's real medical needs.

Said Ziemba, "This budget would go to 10 or 12 physicians and pharmacists in Armenia, people with complete knowledge of the local situation. This makes the research affordable, and we would be paying people a good salary in Armenia. This is a difficult time to raise money, but the alternative is unacceptable. People are sick and dying, and I personally feel a sense of urgency."

Through contacts made with the help of Deliver, SHARED has already begun to work with Armenia's Ministry of Health and Minister of Health Tatul Hakobian.

"The government has to play a role. If they do not, nothing will change. We want to develop a coalition of people who are moving in the same direction. And of course, we want to build a community of support between the diaspora and the people in Armenia," said Ziemba.

Long-term Change in Armenia's Health Care

Ziemba says she is fully aware of the many other organizations that raise funds for Armenia -and she urges people to continue to support their efforts.

"Former Soviet Republics like Armenia have fallen off the radar screen with the focus on AIDS in Africa and recent media attention being devoted to illnesses like SARS. What is so essential is to integrate the healthcare system with a computer system that can manage needs and delivery of medicines. Countries with resources can provide the knowledge, which is easily used in a country such as Armenia where so many people are well educated," she said.

Ziemba intends to make a two-week trip to Armenia in the next few months to visit hospitals, rural clinics, to meet people in the delivery of health care, to connect with other NGOs and to form closer ties to the Ministry of Health.

"When I think about this project," she said, "it's not a 'sexy' program with the heart wrenching appeal of some other worldwide medical crisis, but for people who want to see long-term change in Armenia, we offer an opportunity to do that, to shift away from a crisis response to very specific needs to planning and change that will ensure better health care into the future."

For further information on SHARED, Inc., visit www.healthshares.org.