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U.Va. teaching Afghan women about U.S. democracy

By Ted Strong

A program hosted by the University of Virginia is teaching Afghan women about the nuts and bolts of American democracy, in the hopes that they'll bolster democracy in their home country.

The three-week program includes a mix of job-shadowing and speakers. It's aimed at women who are in leadership roles in Afghanistan but not at the absolute top of government.

"I think right now (the creation of functioning democracy) is going to have to start with kind of the middle, those people like we have now. The top of the government is not always square, and I think the people (at) the very bottom are just trying to get by," said Daman Irby, director of operations at U.Va.'s Center for Politics.

"So, it'll take some of everybody, but I think it'll take people like this, people in the system who do have influence, to try to begin to effect change," he said.

That change will not come overnight, Irby said.

"Participants have an opportunity to effect change more so than a lot of other people in Afghan society, if only for the fact that they're already in these very top-down bureaucratic positions," said Sepideah Mohsenian, education exchange coordinator with Relief International.

Karima Salik is director of women's affairs for the city of Kabul. She has worked in government for more than two decades.

"We saw the development in your country," she said. "It was fruitful. We had a lot of time to exchange ideas, to exchange what we have in Afghanistan and what you have here."

The women are job shadowing at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, the Rutherford Institute and the Virginia Organizing Project, and organizers hope participants will see the inner workings of the rule of law and civic engagement in the U.S.

Participants enjoy the historic sites they get to visit but are mostly focused on learning, Mohsenian said. "I think, just because of where they've come from — these aren't teenagers, they're not college students, they're ministers in Afghanistan — they're really here to learn, and to listen to people."

Wazhma Abdul Rahimzai, who works for the Women & Children Legal Research Foundation in Afghanistan, said she had found the program useful and hopes to take ideas she has learned back to Afghanistan.

She said educating young people will be the key to Afghanistan's future.

A grant from the U.S. State Department is underwriting the program, which is a joint effort of the Center for Politics and Relief International, an aid group. Most of the women work for government ministries.

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