

American Citizen Services

Newsletter

SUMMER 2014

U.S. EMBASSY
SOFIA

OFFICIAL
NEWSLETTER FOR
AMERICAN CITIZENS

HIGHLIGHTS

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Greetings from Ambassador Marcie B. Ries

Dear Resident Americans,

Happy Independence Day!

Welcome to the first U.S. Embassy Sofia E-Newsletter! The American Citizen Services (ACS) section of the Embassy has strategically chosen the start of the summer travel season to initiate this e-newsletter in order to help keep you informed of the latest information regarding issues that affect U.S. citizens residing and travelling in Bulgaria. This edition outlines the services offered by ACS and includes important information, such as travel, voting and Federal benefits tips to

name a few. We hope you enjoy reading this newsletter and welcome your comments. Assisting U.S. citizens overseas is our highest priority, and we look forward to serving you.

In May of this year, I had the pleasure of welcoming our Consular Wardens to my home for this year's Warden Breakfast. I am grateful for the opportunity to personally thank each of the wardens for their hard work and dedication serving U.S. citizens abroad. I hope you enjoy the article in this newsletter on the event.

Finally, as we celebrate Independence Day, I want to remind you that voting is a civic responsibility that connects all overseas Americans together. Please ensure your vote counts in the upcoming primary elections in the United States.

We wish you a wonderful holiday, and a relaxing and enjoyable summer.

Best regards,

Marcie B. Ries

U.S. Ambassador to Sofia, Bulgaria



Annual Consular Warden Breakfast

The American Citizen Services (ACS) Unit hosted the Annual Wardens' meeting at the Ambassador's Residence in Sofia on May 16, 2014.

Ambassador Marcie Ries thanked the wardens for their valuable service to American citizens and recognized their important

contributions to our American community by presenting each warden with a Consular Leadership Award.

The event also included training sessions on emergency preparedness, voting, the Department of State's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)

and review of the warden system and responsibilities.

The event was an excellent opportunity to meet fellow wardens and consular colleagues while strengthening our ability to assist U.S. citizens living in Bulgaria.



Now let's meet everyone!

From the left to right:

Sanders Aitchedji—ACS Staff

Mabel Iskandar— Wife of Tony Iskandar

Athanas Lolov—Warden

Bilyana Danova - Wife of Paul Danov

Paul Danov - Warden

Felicia Lynch— ACS Staff

Tony Iskandar - Warden

Scott Liter - Warden

Dimitar Petkov - Warden

Amanda Liter - Warden

Lisa Leliaert - Warden

Paul Ridgeway—Warden

Erika Erickson—ACS Staff

Martin and Darin Katsarski - Wardens

Philip Voushev - ACS Staff

Diana Zaharieva—ACS Staff

Elizabeth Petrie—ACS Staff

Matt Wilson—ACS Staff

What is a Warden?

Wardens are volunteers who play an invaluable role in their communities by assisting the U.S. Embassy in disaster preparedness, alerting Americans to emergency situations, and providing U.S. Embassies with on-the-ground reports during an actual crisis.

Interested in becoming a Warden? **Please volunteer!** Contact us at acs_sofia@state.gov



Smart Traveler Enrollment Program

A SERVICE OF THE BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS
U.S. Department of State

To enroll in STEP:

Go to:

<https://step.state.gov/step/>.

Click on the "Create an Account" link.

Follow the provided instructions.

You will then be able to:

View your profile.

Add trips or overseas residences.

Register with a specific U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

If you have specific questions about your enrollment in STEP in Bulgaria, please contact us at:

acs_sofia@state.gov.



What is STEP?

The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) is a free service to allow U.S. citizens and nationals traveling abroad to enroll their trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

By enrolling in STEP

YOU:

Receive important information from the Embassy about safety conditions in your destination country, helping you make informed decisions about your travel plans.

Help the U.S. Embassy contact you in an emergency, whether natural disaster, civil unrest, or family emergency.

Help family and friends get in touch with you in an emergency.

STAY INFORMED, STAY CONNECTED, STAY SAFE!



Your vote counts! Did you know that many recent U.S. elections have been decided by a margin smaller than the number of ballots cast by military and overseas voters?

Follow these easy steps to make sure that you can vote in the 2014 U.S. elections:

Don't Forget to Vote!

Register to Vote: Complete a new Federal Post Card Application (FPCA). Even if you have voted by absentee ballot in the past, you must complete a new Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) to vote in the 2014

Receive Your Ballot: Request Electronic Delivery! We encourage you to ask your local election officials to deliver your blank ballots to you electronically (by email, internet download, or fax, depending on your state). Be sure to include your email address on your FPCA to take advantage

of the electronic ballot delivery option.

Research the Candidates and Issues: Online Resources. Check out the FVAP links page for helpful resources that will aid your research of candidates and issues.

Returning Your Completed Ballot: If your state requires you to return paper voting forms or ballots to local election officials, you can do so free of charge at the nearest embassy.

Learn more at the Federal Voting Assistance Program's (FVAP) website at www.FVAP.gov or contact us at ACS_Sofia@state.gov

Federal Benefits - Did you know?



A beneficiary can have his/her benefits deposited into a bank in the U.S.

For U.S. direct deposit, the payee must provide:

- ⇒ The full name and address of the financial institution;
- ⇒ The full bank routing number;
- ⇒ The full account number, including type (savings/checking) and the name(s) on the bank account.

You can enroll by following the information provided at <http://go.usa.gov/ByXV>.

Or

Comerica Bank Direct Express Debit Card:

This program allows recipients to access their benefits by using the Direct Express Debit Card at ATMs around the world, wherever the MasterCard® acceptance mark is displayed. In addition, recipients can make purchases at debit card locations, e.g., markets, drug stores, etc. that accept Debit MasterCards at no cost. Surcharge fees may apply when using Direct Express outside the United States.

Please go to <https://www.usdirectexpress.com/edcfdtclient/index.html#> or contact us.



IMPORTANT NOTE: ATM cash withdrawals outside the U.S. are initially blocked. When you receive your Direct Express® card in the mail, call the Direct Express® card Customer Service Department at 001-765-778-6290 (collect) to activate your card and remove the block for international transactions.

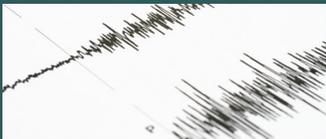
Emergency Preparedness Tips



Bulgaria is located in a seismically active area of the world making it susceptible to earthquakes. After a disaster, local officials and relief workers will not be able to reach everyone immediately. Therefore, be prepared to cope with the emergency until help arrives. The best way to cope with such an event is to make preparations in advance.

Here are things to do before an earthquake strikes:

- ◇ Create a family disaster plan. Teach children what earthquakes are and what to expect. Additionally, find out about disaster plans at the school or any other places that you and your families regularly visit.
- ◇ Maintain a separate emergency supply/first-aid kit to be used only for emergency situations. Store at least a three-day supply of non-perishable food and water per person.
- ◇ Consolidate all personal records, financial documents, school records, etc. and keep these records in a waterproof and portable container.



Remember, preparation is the key!

CG's Corner

Dear Resident Americans:

I hope you enjoyed the newsletter! We plan to have the next edition to you before the end of the year. If you have suggestions for topics to include in our next edition, please feel free to let us know at ACS_Sofia@state.gov.

Remember, our office is available to answer any of your questions and assist you in any Consular related matters. Some of the services we offer to U.S. citizens traveling, living and working in Bulgaria include issuing passports and reports of birth, assistance in the event of death or family emergency, advice in child custody and child abduction cases, support for crime victims as well as for American citizens under arrest, and disaster/crisis assistance.

With many of you traveling for summer vacation, we'd like to offer the following suggestions to help make your trip a pleasant one.

Passports: Check your passport! Is the passport still valid? Remember that unlike adult passports which are valid for ten years, children's passports expire after five years. Also, please remember that all passport renewals must be done in person at the Embassy and that both parents must provide consent for children under 16.

International Travel: The State Department maintains a wealth of information on countries around the world at www.travel.state.gov. Under the International Travel tab at, you can find visa requirements, security cautions, health risks, etc.

Finally, I want to encourage you to register your stay in Bulgaria through the State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). Our goal is to reach all U.S. citizens in Bulgaria with current security information and other important updates. By connecting with us on STEP, we will be also be able to better assist you in the case of an emergency. Visit the new STEP website at: <https://step.state.gov/step/>.

I hope you enjoy your summer!

Regards,

Deborah Campbell
Consul General

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