

**Message from Programs Director Carri Connor:**



*Victory Day Celebration, August 30, 2018 at the Turkish Embassy in Washington, DC.*

Hi!

My name is Carri Connor and I am TASC's Programs Director. It's been six months since I joined TASC, and it's been amazing and gratifying to serve you.

The Turkish American National Steering Committee works very closely with the Maryland State Government on a large list of projects. Our Co-Chair, Gunay Evinch, is a board member of the Maryland Commission on Middle Eastern Affairs for Governor Larry Hogan. As TASC, we work in conjunction with the Maryland Office of the Secretary of State, which is the formal avenue for international relations within the Maryland government system. In 2018, TASC and the Maryland Sister State Committee successfully completed its first large-scale bilateral project, which was to explore opportunities in higher education between Maryland private universities and universities in the Istanbul/Kocaeli region. This resulted in MOUs for enhanced student exchanges, faculty exchanges and joint PhD dissertation committees.

I met members of the Turkish American National Steering Committee at my previous internship at the Maryland Office of the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State houses the Maryland Sister State program, which focuses on identifying a country region that is similar in economy, population, education, and industry as that of Maryland. The Kocaeli region of Turkey is one of these established Sister State relations, and is recognized formally by the Governors of both regions. Both regions house a large port, and have similar educational and business structures. I met members of the Maryland-Kocaeli Sister State Committee at the Office of the Secretary of State's Annual Legislative Reception last February in Annapolis, which allows Maryland state

legislators to meet and understand the 19 different Sister State Committees and the work they have done over the past year, as well as the general public.

As a 21 year old intern, I was left alone for the majority of the evening to happily sip wine and rub elbows with Maryland's top executives and the members of the various committees. The Maryland-Kocaeli Sister State Committee and the TASC-DC cohort were standout groups for me. They were a welcoming, cohesive, and energetic group that I have been lucky to get to know well since starting in my position here at TASC. They offered a huge arrangement of treats, such as Turkish coffee, Turkish Delights, baklava, Turkish wine, and samples of Turkish olive oil. I have since gotten to know the faces behind those treats, including the Turkish Coffee Lady of Tysons Corner, Kavaklıdere Turkish wine, Turkish olive oil from Veret Mullin, and many others. TASC and MKSSC hope to replicate last year's success at the 2019 Sister State Legislative Reception.

The Sister State Program, in my opinion, highlights the very best parts of government. Sister State Committees are government arms that look beyond partisan messaging and the next election; they prize diversity, mutual understanding, and a commitment to work together toward a common goal. Both country regions win. Both send experts for educational exchanges, business meetings, or simply a way to acknowledge that there is a friend abroad.

In 2019, TASC hopes to capitalize on the progress that the Maryland-Kocaeli Sister State Committee has created. Starting in July, TASC will send college students from around the country to Turkey for our Youth Bridges program. Largely modeled off the Israeli Birthright program, it is a way for Turkish American students who may have never visited their Motherland to connect and learn about the culture they came from. Moreover, TASC will spearhead missions to extend Sister State programs into Virginia, Washington, DC, and eventually to New England, and work to identify corresponding regions in Turkey where a Sister State partnership could be mutually beneficial.

During a time of hardship for many affected by the government shutdown around the nation, I am reflecting on what good the government can often do, and what our policymakers can learn from subnational governments and nonprofit organizations. We are all better by working together, finding common ground, and acceptance for others. Turkish Americans welcomed this Irish gal with open arms into their group, despite my lack of Turkish language skills (üzerinde çalışıyorum!). We are always better off finding similarities rather than differences.

Warm wishes,

Carri Connor