

Thank you, General Knight.

I am Molly Gray and I serve as the Lt. Governor of Vermont. I am pleased to say a few words regarding my participation as representative of the State of Vermont in this historic and important visit to North Macedonia.

I want begin by underscoring the importance of the State Partnership Program and Vermont's leadership.

As General Knight mentioned, North Macedonia obtained NATO membership just last year and is working towards European Union Membership. These significant milestones are in part a result of the work of Vermonters, specifically our Vermont guardsmen and women who have supported this Partnership since 1993.

Our small state has a history of service and while many Vermonters may know of the more traditional deployments of guardsmen and women to conflict zones like Iraq or Afghanistan, this visit is important in highlighting the lesser-known work of our guardsmen and women in long-term peace and security operations that support nation-building and economic security.

I want to recognize Vermonter Major Nathan Fry who is embedded in the US Embassy in North Macedonia. Major Fry has been working directly with U.S. Ambassador Kate Byrnes, as well as the Department of State and Department of Defense to support this long-term Partnership as well as the launch of this new Enhanced Economic Initiative.

Be it in recovering from an armed conflict, or a humanitarian crisis like a global pandemic, we know that economic security is a necessary component of long-term peace and security.

Additionally, and as General Knight mentioned, this Initiative poses an important economic opportunity for Vermont. In addition to meetings with Ambassador Byrnes and government officials we will also meet with leaders in agriculture, higher education, business and economic development to establish relationships from which I hope Vermont can build a mutually beneficial economic partnership.

Secretary Kurrle will discuss steps we are already taking here at home to explore opportunities to link our Vermont business and institutions with counterparts in North Macedonia for the purposes of sharing best practices, expertise and innovation.

I am pleased to be working with Secretary Kurrle on this bi-partisan initiative. I also want to thank General Knight, Major Fry and everyone involved in the planning of this visit for the steps taken to include so many women leaders. As is the case here in Vermont, we cannot talk about economic security without having women at the table.

I am proud to have the opportunity to show my support for our guardsmen and women and this work which fits into our State's legacy of service as well as international engagement. On a personal note, I look forward to returning to the Western Balkans where I spent time while working for the International Committee of the Red Cross and drawing on my background in international human rights and humanitarian assistance.

Thank you again, General Knight and I will now turn things over to Secretary Kurrle to further discuss our aims for economic partnership.