

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM**  
**TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN**



**MEDIA ADVISORY**

**For Immediate Release**  
**September 7, 2004**

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**Government Reform Committee to Examine**  
**DHS-State Coordination on U.S. Visa Policy**

*Are They Working Together to Get the Job Done?*

*DHS IG and GAO Reports Conclude That Challenges Remain*

**What: Government Reform Committee Oversight Hearing:**  
**“Creating Secure Borders and Open Doors: A Review of DHS-State Collaboration on U.S. Visa Policy”**

**When: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2004, 10:00 A.M.**

**Where: ROOM 2154, RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING**

**Background:**

Continuing the Committee’s oversight of visa procedures, this hearing will focus on the collaboration between the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State in the establishment and implementation of U.S. visa policy. It is imperative that the two departments work together to improve homeland security while making travel easier for legitimate visitors.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 granted DHS the authority to set policy regarding the granting and issuance of visas; this authority had been held by State. Nearly a year ago, DHS and State clarified the roles of both agencies and established mechanisms by which inter-agency concerns could be addressed. This hearing will examine the collaborative efforts between the DHS and State departments while reviewing the significant challenges still facing the two departments.

A number of policy changes have altered the way in which individuals seeking visas apply to travel to the United States, how information is collected and used to process visa applications, and the procedures by which visa applications are adjudicated.

The Homeland Security Act established a number of requirements for both departments, including the deployment of DHS Visa Security Officers (VSOs) at posts overseas to add a security component to the visa adjudication process. Although VSOs were statutorily required to be installed in Saudi Arabia to review all visa applications, the specific role of the VSO has been under consideration by both State and DHS. In addition, although VSOs have not yet been stationed in other countries, State and DHS are expected to discuss the progress in determining which countries may receive VSOs in the future and what value they will add to the visa adjudication process.

In August, the DHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) released a report that identified several challenges facing DHS in the implementation of the VSO program. Particularly, DHS OIG found that DHS faces challenges in recruiting, training, and maintaining permanent VSOs in overseas posts.

In a previous hearing, the Committee reviewed the visa backlog problems resulting from the lengthy Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) process required for students, scientists, and other applicants who travel to the United States to study or work on particularly sensitive technologies. As a result of an interagency review of the entire process, DHS and State have recently modified the procedure to reduce the time required for applicants to obtain clearance from the applicable agencies without sacrificing security. The Committee will review this collaborative efforts dealing with visa application procedures to ensure that homeland security can be improved while facilitating travel for legitimate visitors.

DHS and State have also collaborated in the implementation of the US-VISIT program. State has nearly completed its installation of equipment and software at the over 200 visa-issuing posts around the world as part of the Visa Biometric Program (the overseas component of the US-VISIT program) and is expected to meet its October 26, 2004, statutory deadline. Biometric data collected at embassies and consulates are being entered into a DHS database that is then used to check applicants against watchlists and to confirm the identity of a visa holder when a visitor attempts entry at a port of entry.

At the hearing, the Government Accountability Office will release its report on the challenges facing the two departments in the strategic use of the data being collected, the embassy and consulate workflow designs that need to be changed to optimize biometric data checks, and the ensuing facility and personnel needs that may result from workflow design changes.

**Witnesses:**

**The Honorable C. Stewart Verdery, Jr.**, Assistant Secretary for Border and Transportation Security Policy and Planning, Department of Homeland Security

**The Honorable Janice Jacobs**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Visa Services, Department of State

**The Honorable Clark Kent Ervin**, Inspector General, Department of Homeland Security

**Jacquelyn L. Williams-Bridgers**, Managing Director, International Affairs & Trade Team, Government Accountability Office

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