

**Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Government Reform Committee Hearing
America's New Welcome Mat: A Look at the Goals and
Challenges of the US-VISIT Program
March 4, 2004**

We meet today to look into the implementation of the US VISIT program by the Department of Homeland Security. US VISIT stands for the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology Program. When completed the program will track the entry and exit of most non-immigrant visa holders who enter the United States. At the outset it is important to acknowledge the scope of this undertaking.

In 2003 there were over 427 million inspections at U.S. ports of entry. Of these inspections 62% involved people from other countries. There are over 300 land, air and seaports of entries in the United States, from Dulles International Airport to the land crossing at Del Rio, Texas.

The vast majority of these inspections, 79%, take place at land border crossings. Unfortunately it is at these crossings where the constraints of space and time combine to place a potentially dangerous burden on legitimate travelers to the United States. Even though only 18% of all travelers seek entry at airports, the interrelated nature of our domestic hub system creates special problems for airports as well.

At the same time, the implementation of US VISIT thus far has not resulted in significant waiting time increases for the traveling public. Although these efforts have achieved some success and government agencies are enthusiastically looking for feedback in improving technology and management methods, US VISIT faces immense challenges as additional consular posts, land border crossing points, and exit points begin to collect biometric data.

Some would say the risk associated with these challenges suggest that this sort of nationwide integrated reform of our border control system is too ambitious. But those people underestimate the damage even one more terrorist event like September 11th could cause to our nation. People want to do business here because we provide a safe and stable commercial environment. Providing and maintaining this environment is one of the most important things this government can do.

Having said that, there are legitimate questions Congress should ask about the planning, acquisition and implementation of US VISIT. First, we would like an update on the effects of the Increment I implementation for entry at airports to date. Second, it would be helpful to have a brief description of the acquisition strategy you have put in place. It would also help to understand how DHS and the Department of State are working together to create an integrated visa issuance and border verification system that leverages all of the information gained at both the consulate and border.

This Committee is also interested in how both DHS and the State Department are reaching out to domestic and foreign stakeholders. Is DHS applying the lessons learned from the TSA baggage screening implementation as it plans for the exit function of the US VISIT program? How are DHS and State informing and educating the foreign business community about US VISIT?

The multitude of questions surrounding this implementation creates a nexus of issues that the Committee on Government Reform is uniquely positioned to discuss. The need for the various related agencies involved to not only cooperate but to allow their internal databases to talk to each other on a minute-by-minute basis worldwide marks a new standard for inter-agency collaboration. The effort to use next-generation technologies in a real world environment is both laudable and worthy of study. Can DHS institute a system that works today and will be flexible to change in the coming years? Is DHS's acquisition plan and schedule reasonable and realistic? Can government effect a nationwide integration while truly exploring and identifying the best solution available?

As the nation anticipates the next phases of DHS's US VISIT program, we need to recognize that this new system is being implemented in a time when this nation faces a continuing terrorist threat. Today's terrorists have decided to engage in asymmetrical warfare by attacking our people and institutions instead of our military. Simply following the old best practices model will not provide an effective defense of our homeland. As a Congress we have to give our most talented federal employees the authority to tear down stovepipes and create a flexible, scalable solution for tracking activity at our nation's borders.

This is a monumental task, and there is no room for error.

We welcome today the Honorable Asa Hutchinson from the Department of Homeland Security and the Honorable Maura Harty from the Department of State. We also have a second panel, which I will introduce later. We believe all of these witnesses will provide the Committee with a diverse set of opinions and viewpoints, and I very much look forward to today's hearing.