

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Thomas R. Carper
“Visa Waiver Program: Implications for U.S. National Security”
March 12, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Today’s hearing considers the important and timely topic of the security of the Visa Waiver Program amid evolving threats to the homeland. As we all know, the Visa Waiver Program is a valuable economic and security tool for the United States.

Congress and the Department of Homeland Security have worked hard to balance the natural tension in the Visa Waiver Program between the need to facilitate international travel and the need to keep Americans safe from the evolving terrorist threats.

When travelers from Visa Waiver countries visit our country, they spend more than \$80.5 billion every year. They stay in our hotels, they buy our goods, they visit our parks, they enjoy our beaches and they eat at our restaurants. All in all, the Visa Waiver tourists support more than 535,000 American jobs.

But the Visa Waiver Program is more than just a revenue generator. It also serves as an important national security tool for the United States. When countries participate in the Visa Waiver Program, they must implement and maintain strong travel screening measures. More importantly, these countries must share robust amounts of traveler information with the United States – information that we would likely not otherwise get. This valuable information has proven to be essential to our counter terrorism officials as they seek to prevent foreign threats from crossing our borders.

With that said, the threats that we face from terrorists have evolved during the life of the Visa Waiver Program. When the Visa Waiver Program was enhanced in 2007, the preeminent threat to the homeland was from Al-Qaeda’s central branch led by Osama bin Laden. Today, bin Laden is no more. Al-Qaeda’s core branch in Afghanistan and Pakistan has been severely weakened. But in their place, Al-Qaeda splinter groups in the Middle East and Africa have arisen and adopted new tactics that pose new threats for our country.

Today, we face the threat posed by ISIS and its determination to use social media to rally recruits and incite attacks against the West, including attacks by individuals who live in Visa Waiver countries. Moreover, conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted thousands of foreign fighters from all across the world who have now joined the ranks of those who wish to do us harm here at home. According to reports, more than 3,400 foreign fighters have traveled from western countries to join in these conflicts. Many of these countries have Visa Waiver privileges with the U.S.

As the number of foreign fighters grows, so do the concerns that the fighters from western countries may use the Visa Waiver Program to bypass our screening efforts at consular posts abroad, where State Department officials have the first opportunity to identify dangerous travelers. Late last year, the Department of Homeland Security took steps to enhance the requirements of the Visa Waiver Program to directly address the new threats we face. I commend the Department for proactively taking these measures.

This hearing is an opportunity to examine the Visa Waiver Program more closely and to see if there are additional steps we can and should take to improve the program and ensure that it continues to evolve and adapt as our enemies and their tactics do the same. We’ll never make the program perfect, but our goal should be to see if we can create, to paraphrase our founding fathers, a more perfect program.

This hearing is also an opportunity to remember that the Visa Waiver Program does not exist in a vacuum – there are many layers to the Department of Homeland Security’s system for securing our borders. That includes robust intelligence collection and analysis, passenger prescreening, and inspections by CBP Officers at our ports of entry. Each of these layers contributes to our overall security.

But we should strive for smart improvements where we can. With each of the Department’s key programs, however, we must strike the appropriate balance between security and commerce, between risk and opportunity.

###