

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson “Visa Waiver Program: Implications for National Security” March 12, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome.

Today’s hearing will evaluate the security, economic and public diplomacy implications of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Specifically, we convened this hearing to examine the security screening and information-sharing mechanisms in place to ensure the VWP remains a secure travel program.

The VWP allows nationals from 38 participating countries to visit the United States visa-free for a period of 90 days or less. To prevent terrorists from exploiting the VWP, U.S. Customs and Border Protection uses the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) to compare a passenger’s biographic information against law enforcement and national security databases.

The VWP serves as an important economic tool for the United States, promoting tourism, trade and investment. According to the Congressional Research Service, in fiscal year 2012, 19.1 million visitors entered the United States under the VWP, representing 40 percent of all foreign travelers. Similarly, the VWP enhances the United States’ bilateral relationships with participating countries by setting mutually beneficial security standards and providing an instrument to combat terrorist travel.

The recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and Copenhagen, as well as the more than 3,400 western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, remind us of the importance of constantly assessing trusted traveler programs to address potential vulnerabilities. In recent weeks, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson stated that his department is taking steps to address any potential weaknesses in the VWP’s structure. On March 2, 2015, Ranking Member Carper, Senator Ayotte and I sent a letter to Secretary Johnson asking DHS to perform an evaluation of the security safeguards in the VWP to further this effort. We look forward to his response.

We should work diligently with our foreign partners to continually refine the program to ensure full compliance with membership requirements and ensure VWP travelers are fully vetted. Doing so will ensure that the VWP will remain a viable trusted traveler program that provides many benefits to Americans while benefiting U.S. security.

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