

Statement of
The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
March 25, 2010

Opening Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Executive Business Meeting
March 25, 2010

If we can assemble a quorum quickly this morning we can make more progress.

We have law enforcement and judicial nominees.

Last week, I spoke about the importance of open government. Today, the Committee can report the bipartisan bill I introduced with Senator Cornyn to improve the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). We call that bill the Faster FOIA Act. It will improve the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act across our Government. It will create a bipartisan commission to study the root causes of agency FOIA delays and to make recommendations on how best to reduce FOIA backlogs. We first introduced it in 2005 and it has previously been reported by this Committee. While the Obama administration is making some progress with the number of overdue FOIA cases falling by half during the past year, this is still a large backlog. The Associated Press reports that more than 67,000 overdue FOIA requests remain outstanding. I have said many times that open government is an American value and virtue. I hope we can make progress today.

Also on today's agenda are two bipartisan bills I introduced with Senator Lugar. These bills make small but important improvements to our laws to recognize those who serve the United States, and to encourage refugees and immigrants to serve their adopted country. The Refugee Opportunity Act creates an exception to the physical presence requirement for refugees who, during their first year in the United States, accept employment overseas with our Armed Services or with a Federal agency to further U.S. policy. I thank Senator Feingold and Senator Cardin for their cosponsoring this bill. The Return of Talent Act would permit lawful permanent residents to return for a period of time to their country of nationality to assist in recovery efforts following a natural disaster or armed conflict without counting that time against them for purposes of citizenship. This bill is especially timely given the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and I am glad to join Senator Lugar to promote a policy that encourages those on the path to United States citizenship to engage in such meaningful work. Senator Feingold is also a cosponsor of this legislation, and I know that Senator Durbin has long been interested in these matters, especially for health care providers who serve in areas in need.

Substitute amendments for both bills have been circulated. I am hopeful we can report these bills today after the delay from last week.

Also on our agenda is another bipartisan effort with Senator Grassley, our Drug Free Communities enhancement bill. I hope we can work together to report that, as well.

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Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
On Reporting The Refugee Opportunity Act And The Return Of Talent Act

March 25, 2010

I thank all Senators for helping us advance the Refugee Opportunity Act and the Return of Talent Act. We worked constructively over the last two weeks to incorporate ideas and address concerns related to both of these bills, and I appreciate the cooperation and input from Members of the Committee. I am also grateful for Senator Lugar's partnership on both of these bipartisan bills.

When enacted, the Refugee Opportunity Act will create an exception to the physical presence requirement for refugees who, during their first year in the United States, accept employment overseas with the Armed Services or with a Federal agency to further U.S. policy. This legislation will assist refugees in the process of building a new life by expanding employment opportunities, and it will allow the Federal Government to benefit from refugees' language and other skills.

The Return of Talent Act will permit lawful permanent residents to return for a period of time to their country of nationality to assist in recovery efforts following a natural disaster or armed conflict without counting that time against them for purposes of citizenship. This bill is especially timely given the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and I am glad we have worked together to promote a policy that encourages those on the path to United States citizenship to engage in such meaningful work.

During today's executive business meeting, Senator Durbin offered an amendment to the Return of Talent Act to encourage medical professionals who are lawful permanent residents to volunteer their skills in countries that have critical needs. This amendment was adopted and will enhance the core purpose of Senator Lugar's legislation.

Senator Sessions offered an amendment to the Return of Talent Act intended to ensure that the benefits conferred by the Return of Talent Act are not abused. This amendment was adopted as well, and furthers our efforts to act on a bipartisan basis on important legislation.

Congress has spoken strongly through legislation about the importance of helping those foreign nationals who have in turn helped us. Congress recently acted on behalf of Iraqi citizens who, at great personal risk, assisted the United States military in Iraq with translation and other services by enacting a special immigrant visa for certain Iraqi citizens who sought to leave Iraq. And

Congress has acted to make the path to citizenship for lawful permanent residents serving in our military as efficient as possible, understanding that few other commitments exemplify devotion to one's adoptive country than serving to protect it.

These two bills sustain the policy of rewarding those who help us, and who help those in need beyond our borders. And in this spirit, they encourage the same selflessness and sacrifice in refugees and lawful permanent residents that we see every day in aspiring new Americans who serve their communities or who serve the United States in our military. I thank all Senators who supported these bills and assisted in moving them to the Senate floor. I hope they will be enacted promptly.

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