

Statement of

The Honorable Edward Kennedy

United States Senator
Massachusetts
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Senator Edward M. Kennedy Statement
Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on
"US-VISIT: Challenges and Strategies for Securing the U.S. Border"
Tuesday, January 31, 2007

Thank you, Chairman Feinstein, for convening this very important hearing. Strengthening the security of our nation's borders through systems such as U.S. VISIT is a vital part of our ongoing effort to prevent future terrorist attacks. Better border security is necessary to detect and disrupt the activities of drug smugglers and violent criminals. Deployment of biometric identification technology is essential, since potential terrorists often use aliases and obtain false or stolen identification.

However, U.S. VISIT needs to be developed and deployed with proper regard for costs and benefits. Technology is essential, but hiring, training, and retaining personnel are also important. The technology needs to have protections against high rates of false matches or equipment slow-downs that interfere with the entry of lawful travelers and goods. Adding fifteen seconds to each inspection at a land port of entry, for example, can cause delays of many hours at the border.

U.S. VISIT will improve our ability to identify people who overstay their visas. We know, however, that the vast majority of foreign visitors, students, and workers who overstay their visas are not criminals or terrorists. Focusing resources on them will not improve national security. Enhancing our intelligence capabilities will.

Above all, we must live up to our history and heritage as a nation of immigrants. Immigration is part of our national well-being, our identity as a nation, and our strength in today's world. In defending the nation, we are also defending the fundamental constitutional principles that have made America strong in the past and will make us even stronger in the future.

Significant improvement of border security will only come with broad immigration reform. Long experience has proven that all elements of the immigration problem must be dealt with together-- stronger enforcement at the border, stronger enforcement inside the United States, legitimate visas to match willing workers with willing employers, and earned legalization for the millions of undocumented immigrants already living and working in the United States -- or none of them will be solved at all.

As our debates in the last Congress proved, our current immigration system is broken. On Election Day, Americans sent a loud and clear message that it needs to be fixed - comprehensively. In fact, last year the Senate came together - Democrats and Republicans - and did that. We passed a far-reaching immigration reform bill. The American people are calling on us to come together again. They know it's a crisis, and they want action now.

So I welcome this hearing, and I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses on this important issue.