Bill reiterates support for Poland, has economic and national security benefits

WASHINGTON – Today, U.S. Representatives Mike Quigley (D-IL), Aaron Schock (R-IL) and Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) reintroduced the Visa Waiver Program Enhanced Security and Reform Act. The bill would enhance the national security benefits of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and boost the economy, while expanding the framework to welcome new countries like Poland into the program.

“Modernizing the Visa Waiver Program will strengthen our national security, provide valuable tourism revenue, and enhance relationships with important allies like Poland, who have been frozen out of the VWP due to its outdated structure,” **said Rep. Quigley**. “I hope this bill will move quickly through Congress and to the President’s desk, opening the doors for Poland once and for all.”

Rep. Mike Quigley (center) shares a laugh with Ambassador Kupiecki (left) and President Komorowski (right)at a private meeting at the Polish Consulate in Chicago last May.

"I am pleased to join in this bicameral and bipartisan effort to bring Poland into the Visa Waiver Program," **said Sen. Kirk.** "Poland is a strong ally of the United States and plays a critical role in NATO military operations in Europe and the Middle East, including on the battlefield in Afghanistan. Now is the time to stand behind our Polish allies and allow their citizens visa-free travel to the US, a privilege that nearly all of our other close democratic allies have enjoyed for years."

“I visited Krakow, Poland for the first time in 2011. While there I met with Polish President Bronisław Komorowski, which reinforced my belief that expanding the Visa Waiver Program would strengthen our partnership as allies and benefit the U.S. economy,” **said Rep. Schock**. “In Illinois, our state has greatly benefited from the contributions of the local Polish community. The Polish community has achieved high levels of home ownership, education and income, all characteristics we should continue to embrace and build upon by including Poland as part of the Visa Waiver Program.”

The VWP affords foreign nationals of participating countries up to 90 days of visa-free travel to the United States. Thirty-seven countries are currently eligible for visa-free travel as designated by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in consultation with the State Department. Current law uses the visa refusal rate as one of the enumerators for designation in the program, and that number has held Poland outside of designation.

The bill would update eligibility criteria for applicant countries, requiring a low overstay rate, set at less than three percent of foreign nationals who remain in the United States after their visa expires. Should a country meet the criteria, the Secretary of DHS may then waive the refusal rate criteria, or applicants denied travel at U.S. consular offices abroad, from three to ten percent on a country-by-country basis, which opens the door for Poland’s inclusion. The bill makes several other modifications to enhance national security and make efficiencies to calculations required for entry to the program.

Similar legislation was previously introduced in both the 111th and 112th Congresses and formally endorsed by President Obama, who spoke in favor of VWP expansion last year. The legislation also has the support of the U.S. Travel Association (USTA), U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Hotel and Lodging Association, and National Retail Federation.

Expansion of the VWP would bring increased revenue to the travel industry at a time when America's economy needs it most. According to USTA, in 2010, more than 17 million visitors to the US were from VWP countries, comprising 65 percent of all visitors. While visiting, they spent nearly $61 billion, supporting 433,000 American jobs and generating $9 billion in tax revenues.

In addition to Quigley and Schock, the House bill is supported by Illinois Reps. Bill Foster (D-IL), Luis Gutierrez (D-IL), Adam Kinzinger (R-IL), Dan Lipinski (D-IL), Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Brad Schneider (D-IL), and John Shimkus (R-IL).

Rep. Quigley has long advocated for expanding VWP and testified before Congress on the benefits of including Poland and other diplomatic partners. Last year, Rep. Quigley traveled to Poland with Senator Kirk to speak with President Bronisław Komorowski on the issue and met again when President Komorowski visited Chicago. Chicago is home to nearly one million citizens of Polish ancestry, the highest concentration of any city outside of Warsaw.

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