

WASHINGTON (25 Sept.) -- On Tuesday, the House Committee on Homeland Security approved the Coast Guard Authorization Act, H.R. 2830, which contained legislation authored by U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.) that creates a pilot program for the mobile biometric screening of aliens interdicted in the maritime environment.

Congressman Bilirakis's proposal (H.R. 2490), which the Committee added to the Coast Guard bill, would create a pilot program enabling the Coast Guard, the lead federal agency for maritime homeland security, to collect biometric information on waterborne aliens and screen them against existing federal databases of those wanted for immigration violations and other transgressions of U.S. laws. The bill also requires the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to evaluate the results to determine the feasibility and appropriateness of expanding such capability throughout the DHS maritime border system.

"I am pleased the Committee acted decisively to include this very important tool in our nation's maritime border security infrastructure," said Bilirakis. "The instant processing of illegal aliens in our maritime domain through biometric identifiers is critical to clamping down on immigration violators, criminals, previous deportees and possible terrorists. Without it, these often repeat offenders will continue to bounce off our existing maritime border security efforts until they successfully gain entry into the United States."

Every year, DHS estimates that more than 10,000 unknown migrants attempt to cross in small boats from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico alone; representing almost 50 percent of maritime migrant apprehension. Most interdicted migrants currently are repatriated because the United States lacks the ability to verify the identity of these apprehended migrants, posing a potentially serious risk to national security.