

Bilirakis Presses Homeland and State Department Officials Over Passport Backlog

WASHINGTON -

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Testifying before the Foreign Affairs Committee, Ambassador Maura Harty, head of the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs, and Mr. Paul Rosenzweig, acting assistant secretary for policy at DHS, both expressed their disappointment in the unforeseen passport backlog caused by the implementation of The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI) earlier this year. Ambassador Harty said she deeply regretted the current backlog and accepted "full responsibility."

Mandated by Congress and recommended by the 9/11 Commission, WHTI requires all travelers by plane, including Americans, from Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Bermuda to present a passport to enter the United States. WHTI will eventually be extended to all travelers entering the United States, including at land and sea crossings.

Congressman Bilirakis urged the panel to act to return the money paid by those for expedited service of their passport applications. He also articulated his concern that interim measures taken to meet demand and the requirements of WHTI might adversely affect the security of the U.S. passport regime.

Following the hearing, Bilirakis commented, "The State Department's effort to meet the surge of passport requests in the wake of the first phase of WHTI is deeply concerning and far from desirable. The response has been laden with under-estimations and personnel shortages."

He added, "While I fully support the implementation of WHTI, which would simplify an identification process at our borders that currently accepts more than 2,000 forms of ID, I believe that these changes should not come at the expense or grief of American travelers. The Congress provided both DHS and State Department ample time to implement WHTI, and they should use all resources possible to solve the current backlog crisis and prevent this from ever happening again."

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