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Kirk, Quigley and Schock Move to Reform Visa Waiver Program

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

WASHINGTON – Today, Senator Mark Kirk (R-IL) and U.S. Representatives Mike Quigley (D-IL) and Aaron Schock (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.

"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."

"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and enhance relationships with important allies like Poland, who have been denied visa-free travel because of an outdated regime," **said Rep.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."

"I visited Krakow, Poland for the first time in 2011. While there I met with Polish President Bronislaw 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."

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 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, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Hotel and Lodging Association, and National Retail Federation.

The bill enhances national security by encouraging information sharing between the United States and member countries and requiring the timely reporting of lost or stolen passports. In addition,

VWP participants are required to maintain enhanced counterterrorism, law enforcement, border control, and document security standards.

The bill would make the primary qualifying criteria for VWP participation both a low overstay rate, set at less than three percent of foreign nationals who remain in the United States after their visa expires, as well as a three percent refusal rate, or applicants denied travel at U.S. consular offices abroad. Should a country meet the criteria, the Secretary of DHS may then waive the refusal rate criteria from three to ten percent on a country-by-country basis, which opens the door for Poland's inclusion.

Expansion of the VWP would bring increased revenue to the travel industry at a time when America's economy needs it most. According to the US Travel Association (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.

Chicago is home to nearly one million citizens of Polish ancestry, the highest concentration of any city outside of Warsaw.

Sen. Kirk has long acted as a staunch supporter of Poland and U.S.-Polish relations and was recently awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit by Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski. Notably, Sen. Kirk has prioritized legislation advocating the expansion of the Visa Waiver Program to include Poland and has fought to strengthen U.S.-Polish cooperation on ballistic missile defense.

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 Bronislaw Komorowski on the issue and met again when President Komorowski visited Chicago.

In 2011, **Congressman Schock** visited Krakow, Poland as a member of the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission to commemorate Reagan's strong relationship with Poland during his presidency.

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