

**House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Field Hearing**

**"The Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative: Perspectives of a Community
on the US-Canada Border"**

**Testimony of Kathleen A. Lynch
Sister of FF Michael F. Lynch, FDNY E40/L35 on Rotation from E62/L32**

Representing 911 Families of Western New York

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11:30 am
Hauptman-Woodward Medical Institute
Flickinger Seminar Suite
700 Ellicott St
Buffalo, NY 14203

Mr. Chairman and Honorable Members of this Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Kathleen Lynch. I reside in Snyder NY, a local community. My brother Michael Lynch, a NYC Firefighter, was killed on September 11th, while rescuing others from WTC Tower 2. I am here today, representing a group of local WNY 911 family members, to express our deep concern over the proposed delay in the implementation of Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative (WHTI), the legislative enactment of an important 9/11 Commission recommendation.

We are all residents of Western New York and recognize that requiring a passport for land border crossings between the US and Canada will change a practice that has long been enjoyed by border residents. We are also family members of loved ones killed in the September 11th attacks and a survivor. We have personally experienced the "cost" or sacrifice that comes with a terrorist attack. We know that it is a far more devastating sacrifice than inconvenience, frustration over delays, or the \$97.00 "cost" attached to a passport. It is a sacrifice that we hope no person or family in this border community will ever have to make.

We watched in astonishment as Congress reacted to panicked travelers by stampeding to a so-called "solution" that prolongs a risk to our national security. Yes-the State Department botched the initial handling of WHTI but our elective representatives reacted by postponing a vital border security initiative, putting our lives at risk. That is both an over-reaction and a high-risk gamble, especially at a time when intelligence agencies warn that al Qaeda is growing stronger and is seeking Western operatives.

We realize that the language postponing WHTI was introduced into the Department of Homeland Security appropriations bill in response to the backlog in passport processing and the lack of progress on passport alternatives. We know that pressure has been placed on Congress by constituents who resist this passport measure, citing inconvenience, cost and economic impact. Though \$9.70 per year for a 10-year passport hardly seems burdensome for many people, when you balance that cost against national security and the threat to human life, we understand that it can be an obstacle for low-income persons and families.

Still, we believe that with innovative and collaborative thinking by Congress, the Departments of State and Homeland Security, and our nation's citizens, these concerns can be addressed without changing WHTI's original timetable.

Since passport cost and backlog are the key roadblocks cited, we propose the following solutions:

Lower the cost of passports by:

- a) Re-appropriating some of the unspent Homeland Security funds to subsidize the expense to each passport applicant;
- b) Applying available capital to reduce the cost of passports themselves rather than investing millions in creating passport alternatives;
- c) Introducing legislation that would give federal income tax credits for passport fees, particularly for low-income families.

Fix the delays by:

- a) Introducing and supporting legislation that will increase State Department processing staff;
- b) Request public cooperation so that anyone with no immediate travel plans defers their passport application until the backlog is under control;
- c) Create regional passport offices along border communities to expedite processing and handle emergencies.

We do not believe the solution lies in now shifting the responsibility for this important federal government function to the states, a suggestion inherent in using enhanced driver's licenses as an alternative. That concept poses its own problems, not the least of which are delays in developing and implementation new technology, the drawbacks and complications attendant in transferring the costs and funding from the federal government to the state; the hiring and training of specialized Department of Motor Vehicle staff; the security clearances that will be needed for DMV workers processing citizenship documents; and the oversight measures that will be needed by the State to ensure there are no security breaches. If every state implements a drivers' license alternative, that security risk will be multiplied by the thousands, due to the vast number of DMV locations.

A secure document for purposes of verifying citizenship already exists: a United States passport. Congressional efforts should be directed toward facilitating passport availability rather than delaying WHTI.

The fact that a record number of people have applied for passports indicates a willingness on the part of US citizens to comply with this common-sense initiative. Unfortunately, there was no effective early public awareness campaign to accompany the initiative explaining the need to start the application process early on, the exceptions for children under 16, and the benefits of WHTI.

Finally, we recognize there is resistance to WHTI because of fears that it will have an adverse impact on the local economies of border cities and states. **However, if Americans can obtain affordable passports within a reasonable time frame, the impact of WHTI will be both temporary and minimal.** In contrast, the economic impact of a terrorist attack, no matter where it occurs, will have a far more devastating ripple effect: on commerce and travel, on our borders, on our military and first responders, and— as the families and friends of those lost on 9/11 can attest— on life itself.

We are Western New Yorkers, but we are Americans first. We should be willing to bear the cost and minor inconvenience of using a passport to cross the US land border.

On September 11th, my brother Michael performed the most extraordinary act of sacrifice that a human being can perform. Michael left behind a legacy of courage—courage in the face of fear and adversity. When my children ask me, could Michael have said No? Could he have refused to enter the World Trade Center or allow others to perform this heroic act? I respond by telling them no. Michael could not and did not abandon his obligation because it was his job as a firefighter to rescue others—even if it meant losing his life. Michael lived up to his responsibility to protect and save others.

We came here today to urge you, our elected officials, not to abandon your primary responsibility to protect us as citizens. Please do not try to delay or transfer this important task. You cannot falter simply because you have encountered obstacles and opposition

Stringent security at our borders is a very real and urgent component of national security. WHTI eases a monumental burden on our border officers who otherwise must sort through a vast array of identification documents. This measure should not be diminished in gravity or priority. Rather than postpone WHTI, we urge you to support the strategies we have suggested. Solving the problems of availability and affordability would enable WHTI, a vital national security safeguard, to be implemented according to its original timetable.

The American people deserve nothing less.

Respectfully,

Kathleen A. Lynch
Sister of FF Michael F. Lynch,
FDNY E40/L35 on rotation from L32 9-11-01

On behalf of 911 Families of Western New York