

OPENING STATEMENT OF
SENATOR GEORGE V. VOINOVICH, RANKING MEMBER
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT,
THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

“THE IMPACT OF IMPLEMENTATION: A REVIEW OF THE REAL ID ACT AND THE WESTERN
HEMISPHERE TRAVEL INITIATIVE”

Good morning. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing.

Since the 9-11 Commission issued its findings and recommendations regarding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Congress has passed several pieces of legislation to improve our nation’s security by implementing those recommendations.

This has included legislation to implement the Commission’s recommendation that everyone, including U.S. citizens, should carry a document enabling their identity to be verified when they enter the U.S. as well as the Commission’s recommendation that the federal government should set standards for the issuance of sources of identification like drivers’ licenses.

Congress’ legislative efforts in these regards have resulted in plans known as the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative and REAL ID, respectively.

There have been significant challenges in implementing each of these programs.

First, the implementation of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, or “WHTI,” at our airports last year was at best chaotic. Through no fault of their own, numerous American travelers missed their departure dates to travel overseas when the amount of time it took to get a passport increased from four to six weeks to several months. These problems were due to an

absolute failure to anticipate demand by the State Department. That was outrageous, and I believe it contributed to the defeat of the President's immigration legislation because people believed that if the federal government could not do something simple like issue passports, it could never implement significant changes to our immigration laws.

While I am told most passport issuance problems have been resolved, I am interested in learning what steps the Departments of Homeland Security and State are taking to ensure that travelers don't face similar – or worse – problems when WHTI is implemented at land and sea ports next year.

I am also interested in discussing how these policy changes could impact cross-border tourism and trade. I visited the Windsor port last summer and heard about slow processing because of staffing shortages on the Canadian side of the border. Imagine my shock last week when I met with members of the Canadian Parliament who told me about unbelievable lines and wait times because of U.S. staffing shortages and policies.

I question how we can successfully implement policies that could further slow cross-border travel if we are doing such a poor job now to secure our borders in a way that facilitates the free flow of legitimate trade and travel.

This is important to states like my home state of Ohio, where in 2006 there was a \$2.7 billion trade surplus with Canada and there were over 500,000 Canadian visits to Ohio. We cannot have more embarrassments and problems like those that occurred last summer as the Departments of State and Homeland Security work to implement WHTI at land and sea ports.

I also have concerns about the REAL ID program.

I am troubled by the significant cost REAL ID compliance imposes on our states. According to DHS regulations, REAL ID compliance is expected to cost states almost \$4 billion. Yet only \$90 million has been appropriated for REAL ID grants to states to date. This is a small sum when you consider that Ohio estimates that its initial cost of compliance would be 1/6th of that amount, or \$15 million.

I am also concerned about the fact that the Department of Homeland Security's regulations indicate states should utilize databases like the Electronic Verification of Vital Events system to verify REAL ID applicants' information even though DHS acknowledges that this and other systems are not ready for full implementation.

I question how we can go forward with a proposal that asks states to utilize systems that don't exist or don't work.

As we implement the 9-11 Commission recommendations, we must do so in a way that is intelligent, thoughtful, and involves good management practices. We cannot proffer artificial measures that will do more harm than good. Further, we must allocate the resources necessary to implement the 9-11 Commission recommendations.

I look forward to hearing today about how the Departments of Homeland Security and State plan to meet the demands associated with REAL ID and WHTI. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.