



Visa Waiver Program

Fact Sheet

Office of the Spokesperson

Washington, DC

November 20, 2015

The Visa Waiver Program (VWP), administered by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), allows eligible citizens or nationals of countries which have met U.S. security requirements to travel to the United States without visas in exchange for visa-free travel to those countries by U.S. citizens. The VWP utilizes multiple layers of security to detect and prevent terrorists, serious criminals, and other potentially dangerous individuals from traveling to the United States. These layers of security include comprehensive screening of VWP travelers prior to departure for the United States, at various points throughout the traveler's journey, and upon arrival at U.S. ports of entry.

Over the last year, DHS and the Department of State, in coordination with several other federal agencies, have made a number of significant enhancements to the VWP to ensure our security apparatus continues to adapt in the face of evolving threats.

How Does the Visa Waiver Program Work?

- Every prospective VWP traveler undergoes counterterrorism screening and must receive approval through DHS' Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA). Through ESTA, DHS evaluates whether individuals are eligible to travel to the United States under the VWP **before** they are allowed to board a carrier bound for the United States.
- The counterterrorism check draws on information from U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies. DHS uses this information to decide if the travel poses any law enforcement or security risks. Without DHS approval through ESTA, VWP travelers cannot travel to the United States and must appear in person for a visa interview if they still want to travel to the United States.
- Any individual applying for a U.S. visa undergoes thorough biographic and biometric screening against U.S. law enforcement and counterterrorism databases. Biometric screening includes checks based on fingerprints and/or facial recognition software. No visa can be issued unless all relevant concerns are fully resolved.
- Information submitted during an ESTA application is shared with consular officers to help them determine whether a visa should be issued after an ESTA application has been denied.
- As part of this screening process, information that identifies suspected or known violators of the law and other persons of concern will be provided to the appropriate law enforcement, national security, and/or counterterrorism agency.
- This process has been enhanced repeatedly to improve security and more effectively identify individuals who might pose a threat to the United States.
- Travelers must be a citizen of a VWP country to use the program. Residence in a VWP country, or the possession of refugee travel documents issued by a VWP member state, does not qualify an individual for VWP travel.
- For the list of countries whose citizens are eligible for VWP travel, please visit <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/en/visit/visa-waiver-program.html>.

Recent Enhanced Security Measures

- DHS, in consultation with the Department of State, continuously adapts the VWP to address current threats.
 - DHS introduced additional data fields to the ESTA application in November 2014 that already have security benefits.
 - DHS introduced new traveler screening and information sharing requirements for VWP countries in August 2015 specifically to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters.
 - DHS and the Department of State are working with VWP partners to implement the new VWP requirements, which will strengthen U.S. security and the security of our partners.
- These security enhancements are part of our continuing assessments of U.S. security in the face of evolving threats and challenges, and our determination to stay one step ahead of those threats and challenges.

For further information, please contact the Bureau of Consular Affairs at CAPressRequests@state.gov or visit travel.state.gov.