

JULY 28, 2003

**SCHAKOWSKY TO SECRETARY POWELL:
ENSURE SECURITY BUT TREAT PEOPLE SEEKING U.S. VISAS WITH RESPECT AND
DIGNITY**

WASHINGTON, D.C. - In a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell, U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) wrote, *"While security must be our number one concern, we must also ensure that all those who try to come here through the proper channels are treated with respect and dignity. Safety and security concerns must be thoroughly addressed. But, where we do have control over the process, we should strive for the highest level of quality service."*

□ Schakowsky expressed concern *"with the treatment many people receive at U.S. Embassies and Consular Offices throughout the world and with the increase in long delays many more visitors will start experiencing given the new requirement for face-to-face interviews with all visa applicants."*

Schakowsky added, *"I have received many complaints from constituents about poor service at U.S. Consular Offices and Embassies when people try to come to the U.S. to reunite with family members, to engage in scholarship or business, or to be a tourist."*

"For example," Schakowsky wrote, "one of my constituents has been working to bring her cousin here from Nigeria so he can have an operation to remove a potentially fatal tumor. Yet, when I tried to fax a letter of support to the Consular Office in Lagos, my office was told that letters of support simply get thrown out. Officers at the Lagos Consular Office have also expressed that they are extensively overworked and that it would be impossible to expedite this case."

Schakowsky also pointed to specific accounts where:

- applicants were denied the right to ask Officers questions, or were refused an explanation when their applications were denied;

- officers at Embassies and Consulates refused to provide their names or ignored documents that visa applicants brought to the interviews;□

- interviews lasted just a few minutes;□

- Foreign Service officers refused to look at an applicant; and□

- applicants were charged money for every visit to the Consular office, even if their appointment was cancelled and rescheduled for a later date.

In the letter, Schakowsky also raised concerns about the new State Department policy requiring *"Foreign Service officers to conduct face-to-face interviews with nearly all visa applicants, taking away their previous discretion to waive many of those interviews,"* without providing additional financial resources to carry out this extra workload. Earlier this month, Congress approved a Schakowsky amendment calling on Secretary Powell to provide adequate resources to U.S. embassies and consulates so that rules requiring face-to-face interviews for virtually all those seeking a U.S. visas may be implemented without unnecessary and long delays and without compromising security.

Below is Schakowsky's letter to Secretary Powell:

July 25, 2003

The Honorable Colin Powell
Secretary of State
The U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

I am writing to express my serious concerns with the treatment many people receive at U.S. Embassies and Consular Offices throughout the world and with the increase in long delays many more visitors will start experiencing given the new requirement for face-to-face interviews with all visa applicants. Foreign travel to the United States is a tremendous economic resource for this country, as well as a wonderful way to share our culture with the world. When people are able to experience America firsthand, they often return home with an affinity toward us that may inspire future business partnerships, cultural exchanges, and other positive relationships between foreign countries and the United States. While security must be our number one concern, we must also ensure that all those who try to come here through the proper channels are treated with respect and dignity in order for us to maintain our reputation as a country that welcomes visitors and is a good member of the global community.

Providing good and timely service to all potential visitors and immigrants to the United States should be one of the top priorities at our Consulates and Embassies abroad. Unfortunately, I have received many complaints from constituents about poor service at

U.S. Consular Offices and Embassies when people try to come to the U.S. to reunite with family members, to engage in scholarship or business, or to be a tourist. I have received accounts of Officers at Embassies and Consulates refusing to provide their names or ignoring documents that visa applicants bring to their interviews; of interviews lasting just a few minutes; of applicants being unable to ask Officers questions; of applicants being refused an explanation when their applications are denied; of Foreign Service officers who refuse to even look at an applicant; and of applicants being charged money for every visit to the Consular office, even if their appointment is cancelled and rescheduled for a later date.

I understand and accept that the process for coming to the United States is not quick or simple. Safety and security concerns must be thoroughly addressed. But, where we do have control over the process, we should strive for the highest level of quality service. Rude and dismissive behavior only damages our standing in the world and sets a terrible example. Unfortunately, that is often reported to be the case. For example, one of my constituents has been working to bring her cousin here from Nigeria so he can have an operation to remove a potentially fatal tumor. Yet, when I tried to fax a letter of support to the Consular Office in Lagos, my office was told that letters of support simply get thrown out. Officers at the Lagos Consular Office have also expressed that they are extensively overworked and that it would be impossible to expedite this case.

Furthermore, it was recently announced that the State Department has ordered Foreign Service officers to conduct face-to-face interviews with nearly all visa applicants, taking away their previous discretion to waive many of those interviews. Again, while I support necessary security precautions, this order will clearly result in months of backlogs that could seriously jeopardize American business, education, and tourism. I am especially concerned that, despite acknowledging these anticipated backlogs, the State Department has made it clear that the Embassies and Consulates must use existing resources to carry out this extra workload and, ashamedly, the State Department will not be offering overtime to employees. Instead of increasing our safety, I am concerned that strictly enforcing the interview requirement in an attempt to catch terrorists before they come to the United States will simply exacerbate the existing problem of overworked Foreign Service officers. The Washington Post, in its May 24th article on the issue, reported that "many Foreign Service officers complain that they are already overburdened by their workload. Some fear that increasing interviews will only increase the chances of mistakes."

It is important that we train our Foreign Service Officers to provide high quality and fair service to all potential visitors, and not promote a culture where Officers are allowed to treat anyone with disregard or disrespect. We must also provide these Officers with adequate supervision and support necessary to do their jobs well. This is important, not only so that we put a good face forward, but in order to protect our security by minimizing the chances of mistakes when processing visa applications. I understand that their work is very demanding, and, therefore, it is critical that they not be overworked or left to handle difficult situations without guidance from a supervisor. As the first American officials many foreigners will encounter in the process of traveling to

the United States, it is important that our Foreign Service Officers present a friendly and welcoming face to the world.[]

I greatly appreciate your attention to this matter.[] I look forward to working with you to implement an effective solution and to ensure that you have the resources needed to achieve these goals.

[][][] Sincerely,

[][][] Jan Schakowsky

[][][] Member of Congress

cc: Assistant Secretary Maura Harty, Bureau of Consular Affairs