



IMMIGRATION

As part of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform bill, Senator Akaka successfully convinced the Senate to include two important amendments to the pending landmark measure. The first would grant the children of Filipino World War II veterans special immigrant status to allow these veterans and their families to reunite. The second amendment would clarify the process for countries to enter the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). The amendment could provide a significant increase in business and leisure travel to Hawaii, as well as to the rest of the country.

The first Akaka amendment calls attention to hardships endured by Filipino Veterans because of current U.S. immigration practices. There are countless numbers of Filipino World War II veterans in the U.S. who have been separated from their families and who are patiently waiting to reunite with family members.

These veterans are now predominantly in their 80s. Prospective family-sponsored immigrants from the Philippines have the most substantial waiting times of any group for a visa. The average wait for Filipinos to obtain a visa is 20 years. The Akaka amendment grants the children of Filipino World War II veterans special immigrant status for purposes of family reunification.

The second Akaka amendment codifies the process through which foreign countries admitted are admitted to the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP). The VWP enables foreign nationals of member countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for 90 days or less without obtaining a visa. Since 1986, when the VWP began as a pilot program, more than 27 countries have become certified to participate in the program in the past 20 years. As a result, the United States has realized substantial diplomatic and economic rewards. For states like Hawaii which depend heavily on tourism, the Visa Waiver Program is vital to their economy.

However, there is presently no codified process to ensure that a country will be admitted into the Visa Waiver Program, even after it has fulfilled the necessary requirements. Allowing countries into the program as soon as all requirements are met is important for fostering and maintaining close ties with friendly nations. Senator Akaka's amendment would allow an applicant nation to become a member of the Visa Waiver Program once the rigorous entrance requirements have been met.

Both amendments are now part of the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act and will be a part of the package that will be resolved by Senate and House conferees. Following debate on the subsequent conference report, both bodies will vote and send the bill to the President.