



Announcement on Visa Changes for Same-Sex Couples

Remarks

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SECRETARY KERRY: Thank you. Well, thanks for gathering, I know on relatively short notice. I really appreciate it. One of the – first of all, it's great to be in London, and thank you for all of you here. How many of you are Embassy? You all raise your hands. How many are consular section? A few. Most of them I left behind in the consular section now, anyway. Well, thank you for joining us.

One of the most special things that we get to do – you guys, come on in. Let's get everybody in here before we start, whoever's standing in. I know we have one of the largest consular sections in the world here. I think Moscow may be slightly larger. But the work that you all do here is really important, because for many people, you're the first faces that people get to see of America and the first impression they get. And hopefully, it can be a good one. Obviously, sometimes there are visa issues and it doesn't always turn out the way people want it to be.

But we appreciate what you do, and the fact is that one of the greatest responsibilities of the State Department is to show people who America is, who we are as people, and what we value as Americans. And that's what every single one of you do every single day here at Embassy London, and it's what our colleagues do at posts all around the world. I just came from addressing a very large gathering in Islamabad, Pakistan, a difficult tour of duty, but equally important in terms of our efforts to promote democracy and promote the values of human rights and so forth.

So when I first came here in my first stop, my first foreign stop as Secretary of State 27 countries ago, I said to everybody that you're all ambassadors no matter what you're doing here, and that is true. When you step out of the Embassy and go down the street or wherever you live, wherever you are, you're an ambassador of our country. And when you treat people with respect and you give them the best of yourselves, you show them the best of America, and that means showing them what we believe, what we stand for, and what we share with the world.

One of our most important exports by far is America's belief in the equality of all people. Now, our history shows that we haven't always gotten it right. As I mentioned yesterday in Islamabad, slavery was written into our Constitution before it was written out. And we are still struggling to make equal the rights between men and women and to break the glass ceiling and to make sure that all people are created equal. That is what we try to do, I think wearing our heart on our sleeve, and sometimes our warts, more than almost any other nation on the face of the planet. We believe in working to do better and to live up to these higher values, and we try to do it in a lot of different ways.

Today is one of those days. I'm very pleased to be able to announce that effective immediately, when same-sex spouses apply for a visa, the Department of State will consider that application in the same manner that it will consider the application of opposite-sex spouses. And here is exactly what this rule means: If you are the spouse of a U.S. citizen, your visa application will be treated equally. If you are the spouse of a non-citizen, your visa application will be treated equally. And if you are in a country that doesn't recognize your same-sex marriage, then your visa application will still be treated equally at every single one of our 222 visa processing centers around the world.

Now, as long as a marriage has been performed in a jurisdiction that recognizes it so that it is legal, then that marriage is valid under U.S. immigration laws, and every married couple will be treated exactly the same, and that is what we believe is appropriate. Starting next year, that will include same-sex couples from England and Wales, which just this year passed laws permitting same-sex marriage that will take effect in 2014.

And as you know, more than two years ago, President Obama instructed our Department of Justice to stop enforcing DOMA. Then just a few weeks ago, the Supreme Court of the United States declared DOMA unconstitutional. Today, the State Department, which has always been at the forefront of equality in the federal government, I'm proud to say, is tearing down an unjust and an unfair barrier that for too long stood in the way of same-sex families being able to travel as a family to the United States.

I am proud to say that I voted against DOMA, one of 14 votes against it and the only person running for election that year who voted against it, and it's one of the better votes that I've cast. It was the right vote then, it's the right vote today. And I'm pleased to make this announcement today because this is one of those moments where policy and values join together. And I think those of you in the consular division, more than me or more than any of us back at the State Department on a daily basis, are going to bet you'd be the people who get to make this a reality for people.

So those of you working today in the consular section will make history when you issue some of the first visas to same-sex couples, and you will be some of the first faces to welcome them to the United States in an always – a country that obviously is always trying to tweak and improve and do better by the values around which we were founded. You share in the great responsibility of making our country live its values, and you make possible the journey of those who want to visit our country for that reason and many more.

I might remark that I get to sit up on the 7th floor of the State Department looking out straight at the Lincoln Memorial. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the famous march on Washington and of Martin Luther King's unbelievably eloquent and historic plea for equality. So that is where the dream was declared, the march goes on, this is several more steps in that march. I can't thank you enough for your hard work, and as always, I am proud to call myself your colleague. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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