

U.S-CARIBBEAN STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT ACT (PL 114-291)

TESTIMONY OF
KENNETH H. MERTEN
ACTING PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
BUREAU OF WESTERN HEMISPHERE AFFAIRS
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BEFORE
THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
July 19, 2017

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the State Department's multi-year Caribbean strategy, which we submitted to Congress on June 19 under the United States-Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act of 2016. I would also like to thank Representatives Engel and Ros-Lehtinen for their leadership and efforts in enhancing relations between the United States and the Caribbean. The Caribbean region is the United States' "third border," characterized by common interests and societal ties that yield daily benefits for our countries' shared prosperity, but also many common security threats as well.

The Department's multi-year Caribbean strategy establishes a framework for enhancing U.S.-Caribbean relations in six broad areas: security, diplomacy, prosperity, energy, education, and health. On security, we will work with Caribbean governments to strengthen regional security and advance the safety of our citizens by pursuing programs to dismantle transnational criminal organizations, curb the trafficking and smuggling of illicit goods and people, strengthen the rule of law, improve citizen security, and counter vulnerability to terrorist threats. On diplomacy, we will undertake increased, institutionalized engagement that will forge greater multilateral cooperation at the Organization of American States and United Nations.

On prosperity, we will support U.S. exports and job creation by engaging with our Caribbean partners to promote sustainable economic policies and job-creating, private sector-led growth. On energy, we will seek to increase the use of low cost, reliable sources of energy to spur economic development that will create new opportunities for globally competitive U.S. energy firms and exports.

On education, we will promote educational and cultural programs between the Caribbean and the United States that build stronger economic partnerships, counter vulnerability to crime and extremism, promote the export of U.S. higher education services, and advance cooperation on science, technology, and development. On health, we will serve U.S. national and security interests by improving health security, advancing public health, and strengthening resilience to emergencies and disasters in the Caribbean.

In consultation with USAID, the Department developed this Caribbean strategy by establishing and consulting a multi-stakeholder group that included members of the Caribbean diplomatic corps, Caribbean diaspora, private sector, civil society, and at least 18 other government agencies. I personally met with the Caribbean Community's Caucus of Ambassadors and members of the Caribbean diaspora several times to solicit their input.

The Department has already developed an internal process to implement this Caribbean strategy. This process relies on the same multi-stakeholder group that provided input for the strategy itself. We have established interagency working groups on security, diplomacy, prosperity, energy, education, and health that have already begun meeting to plan and implement the various goals and initiatives featured in our strategy. We have designed an internal system for tracking the progress of these working groups, which we will use as the basis for the administration's two-year update to Congress under the Act.

The Department has already begun to deliver on the commitment to enhanced diplomatic relations delineated in the strategy. Our Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Tom Shannon, traveled to Grenada to meet with Caribbean leaders and Foreign Ministers on the margins of the Caribbean Community's annual heads of government meeting July 5-6. This was the first time we have ever sent a high-ranking U.S. official to this meeting.

We have also begun planning a Caribbean trade conference, scheduled to take place this fall in Miami, which will facilitate trade and investment opportunities for U.S. and Caribbean companies alike.

As we begin this multi-year process, the Department remains committed to continue working closely with Congress to fully implement our Caribbean strategy and the United States – Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act.

I look forward to your questions.