

US Says Visas From Gay Spouses Will Get Equal Treatment

U.S. officials paved the way on Friday for same-sex spouses to visit or live in the United States, announcing the State Department will give equal treatment to visa applications of gays and lesbians who want to travel with their partner.

Secretary of State John Kerry, announcing the measure at the U.S. embassy in London, said the shift will allow the department to start processing requests from married gay couples the same way it handles those from heterosexual spouses.

"As long as a marriage has been performed in the jurisdiction that recognizes it, then that marriage is valid under U.S. immigration laws. Every married couple will be treated exactly the same, and that is what we believe is appropriate," Kerry said.

The move, which follows similar action last month by U.S. immigration officials, would help U.S. citizens live and travel with their same-sex spouse in the United State as well as allow married couples from other countries to visit the United States.

It will mostly affect married gay couples overseas, gay rights advocates said. For example, if one spouse has a visa to travel to the United States for work or study, their spouse can apply to come along.

It would also help gay Americans living in other countries bring their spouse to the United States, they said.

"This is exciting news for couples who are living abroad,"

said Victoria Neilson, legal director for the advocacy group Immigration Equality.

The move comes after the Obama administration urged all U.S. agencies to review their policies after the U.S. Supreme Court in June struck down a key part of the federal law that defined marriage as between a man and a woman.

U.S. immigration law requires visa travel documents for those who want to live in the United States permanently or to stay temporarily.

In July, the Department of Homeland Security said its U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) would begin reviewing petitions filed on behalf of same-sex spouses the same way as those for spouses in heterosexual marriages.

Friday's announcement by the State Department gives U.S. embassies and consulates around the world the same power to do so on applications filed overseas.

"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. 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," Kerry said.

Fifteen countries outside the United States recognize same-sex marriage, according to Immigration Equality.

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