

## TESTIMONY OF THE MAINE IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS COALITION SUPPORTING LD3:

*"An Act to Establish the Winter Energy Relief Payment Program to Aid Residents with High Heating Costs and to Finalize the COVID Pandemic Relief Payment Program"*

Sponsored By: House Speaker Rachel TALBOT ROSS of Cumberland County and Senate

President Troy JACKSON of Aroostook County

Public Hearing: December 21, 2022 at 1:00pm

Link: <https://legislature.maine.gov/backend/App/services/getDocument.aspx?documentId=92173>

Dear Members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee:

My name is Mufalo Chitam, Executive Director of Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition.

I am here to testify in support of the bipartisan emergency heating and housing relief package. I am speaking on behalf of our staff, board and a non-profit organization composed of almost 100 member organizations committed to advancing and defending the rights of Maine's immigrant communities. Our mission is to improve the legal, social, and economic conditions experienced by Maine's immigrants, enhancing their lives while strengthening Maine through advocacy, information sharing, and collaboration. We actively prioritize the voices, perspectives, and decision-making of our communities while acknowledging the status quo of systems that consistently disadvantage them.

LD3 has created an opportunity for a statewide conversation on two very importance issues. I want to use my time to speak to about this moment in time which is calling for us all to do things differently because of the unpredecended times we find ourselves in.

When the new Maine State Legislature was sworn in on December 7, we had hoped to see immediate action taken to help vulnerable Maine residents who are struggling with high heating costs and a lack of permanent housing. Unfortunately, that action has been delayed until today.

I heard a wise man last week (called Dr Bayo) eloquently say and I quote "If we stick with the process and paradigms that we are used to, we risk reincacerating ourselves in paradigms that have no use."

The day after the bill failed I had to break the bad news to families at a hotel in Freeport they said to me "where are we going to go? For many immigrant families, moving to the US and Maine is their only way of survival and "there is no original home to return to."

If the \$15 million of emergency housing is not included in the package, then we are just reproducing the problem (of homelessness) because 1084 households end up on the street and trying to seek general assistance from already strapped municipalities. I am not here to "confirm what you already know but to invite" to think differently.

This week I spent hours on calls with Maine Medical nurses and DHSS case managers who cannot discharge women with new borns because they have no shelter to take their new born babies. These new mothers need you to help them get through winter by approving heating and housing relief. Our crisis response systems are outdated and the way we respond to the crisis is now part of the crisis.

There is no additional time to waste; we need action now.  
TODAY WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN WILL BE SEEN IN HOW YOU VOTE!

Many of our most at-risk Mainers are facing the dual challenge of both unprecedented heating costs and the end of Emergency Rental Assistance, just as the harsh Maine winter season begins.

Over sixty percent of Maine households rely on heating oil, compared to just four percent nationally; our state and its residents are particularly vulnerable to global fuel disruptions and volatility. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, “heating needs during the frigid winters contribute to Maine having the highest per capita energy use in New England.”

This package could provide 1084 at-risk Maine households access to funds necessary to stay sheltered as the federal Emergency Rental Assistance program ends. These issues are quite literally a matter of life or death for some people and urgent, bipartisan action by you, the state’s policymakers, is needed. Without emergency action, people will lose their homes. People will spend the winter in freezing conditions. People will die. We cannot live our fellow Maine residents out in the cold, literally.

We urge you to include funding for both heating and housing assistance in this legislation, two issues impacting Mainers of all backgrounds, immigrant and non-immigrant alike, across the state. This legislation will go a long way in helping to ensure many of the most vulnerable among us stay safe and warm this winter.

I will end with another poignant quote from Dr. Bayo Akomolafe ...” May we lose our way generously to find other ways of being in the world and may our work open up different ways of preserving inclusion but also going beyond critic and inclusion. To find other ways of sprouting and shape-shifting the world. “

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