



**Testimony of Joby Thoyalil, Maine Business Immigration Coalition
In Support of LD 3, 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**

December 21, 2022

Dear President Jackson, Speaker Talbot Ross, and members of the joint standing committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Joby Thoyalil and I am submitting testimony on behalf of the Maine Business Immigration Coalition (MeBIC) in support of LD 3 - 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.

MeBIC is Maine's only resource dedicated to providing information, education and advocacy on immigration and related issues from and for the business and economic perspective. While we support the bill in its entirety, we particularly support Section A-3 of the bill, which transfers funding from the General Fund unappropriated surplus to the Emergency Housing Relief Fund, and I will focus my testimony on this portion of the bill.

As you know, federal emergency housing relief funds will expire at the end of this month and as a result, thousands of people in Maine will lose housing and shelter and will likely become homeless in the middle of winter. This includes over 2,000 people who recently arrived to our state seeking asylum.

We believe that no one in Maine should struggle to meet the basic human needs of housing and heat in the depths of winter. Due to differences in how our laws treat noncitizens, asylum seekers in Maine are particularly vulnerable. We know that most asylum seekers in Maine have faced great challenges up to this point. From escaping persecution in their countries of origin, to persevering through arduous journeys, and risking their lives and freedom for the chance at a better life in the United States. Once they arrive, they are not authorized to work, despite the fact that most are able-bodied and eager to do so. Without jobs, they have no way to pay for housing and must survive through public and private social services for a period of time. With the expiration of the federal emergency housing funds this month, one lifeline is about to disappear at the worst possible time of year and will leave people stranded with no other option. That is why this bill is so important. It is an emergency stop-gap to prevent a humanitarian crisis and will help prevent the loss of valuable new members of our society - most of whom would otherwise be forced to leave Maine in order to survive.

It is widely agreed that new immigrants are part of the solution to Maine's short- and long-term workforce shortages. We know from our partners in the business community that employers are still struggling to find enough workers and at a 3.7% unemployment rate, Maine is still at full employment. Most people seeking asylum bring education, skills, and expertise with them and are able and eager to work. Unfortunately, due to our broken immigration system and backlogs in asylum processing, we know that many choose to move on to seek asylum in Canada, where the process is more promising. We are already losing potentially valuable new neighbors, community members, and contributors to our workforce and economy. Maine can't afford to lose any more asylum seekers due to inhospitable laws and policies and should take this step to facilitate them staying and becoming integrated into our communities.

We urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 3 because it is both the right thing to do for humanitarian purposes, but also because it is an investment in our future workforce and economy.