

Testimony from the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition regarding:

LD258: "An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2023, June 30, 2024, and June 30, 2025"

Sponsored By: Representative Melanie Sachs of Freeport

Public Hearing: February 10, 2023 at 1:00pm

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Tobin Williamson and I live in the city of Lewiston, Maine in Androscoggin County. I am the Advocacy Manager with the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), a statewide network of almost 100 member organizations all working to enhance the lives of Maine's immigrant communities.

You have already heard my earlier support for including appropriations for housing in the budget, as the housing crisis is front and center for my organization's advocacy efforts. Simply put, we need more long-term housing, as the demand far exceeds the supply. Yet we also need more short-term housing, as there are dozens of people each day who do not know where they will spend the night. For new arrivals specifically, we need centralized, statewide coordination of housing and wraparound services to support them. We look forward to continuing working with you and with our community partners in trying to address both the short-term and long-term needs that are so critical for our state's continued success.

Along with housing, another of MIRC's policy priorities for this session is the passage of a Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program for Maine. Unlike housing, it is my understanding this is not included in the budget as it is currently written; we would like to see it added!

MIRC staff hear time and time again of people who would like to work or take a different job, but they are unable to do so because they have caregiving responsibilities for their kids, their parents, their significant others, or themselves. Providing for one's family is a central tenet to many cultures, including many of the communities we serve; we often see much larger families than the typical U.S. family because of the importance of caring for parents, siblings, adult children, grandchildren, and so on. Strong family ties like these often require people to choose between caregiving and working outside the home; why can't we have both? Last year, thousands of Mainers signed petitions calling for a paid family leave policy. It is a popular policy among Democratic voters, Republican voters, and independent voters.

On a personal level, I will close my testimony with a couple of personal stories that illustrate how paid leave would have benefitted my family in the past.

After I graduated college, my mother married someone for the first time since her divorce over twenty years prior. They spent several good years together until, tragically, her new husband became ill with what was eventually diagnosed as a brain tumor. Eventually, she had to become a fulltime caregiver to him, between taking him to medical appointments and caring for him at home. She had been a public school teacher for thirty years, but had to leave her profession because she was unable to keep working while taking care of her dying husband. Had there been a paid family leave policy in place, she might still be teaching instead of having been forced into early retirement.

A few years after that sad event, my grandmother died after a lengthy combination of illnesses. She lived several states away, and I was unable to take much time off work to travel and be with her. Had there been a paid family leave policy in place, perhaps I could have spent more time with her in her final days.

My family is but one example, and you will have no doubt heard of many others by the time you read this. Several states have already enacted paid family and medical leave policies; let's not have Maine fall further behind its peers. I encourage you to include Paid Family and Medical Leave in the budget, along with robust support for housing.

With the surge in inflation and energy costs in 2022, many Maine individuals, couples, and families are still struggling. There are still so many unmet needs throughout the state, for both immigrants and non-immigrants. By including items in the budget such as more affordable housing, a paid family and medical leave policy, and a state child tax credit, you have the power to make life a little less stressful for Mainers; indeed, that is the way life should be.

Thank you,

Tobin Williamson
Lewiston, ME
MIRC Advocacy Manager

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