

Testimony neither for nor against LD 258: 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.

Date: February 22, 2023

Testimony by: Tobin Williamson

Dear Committee Members:

My name is Tobin Williamson and I serve as the Advocacy Manager for the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC). I live in the city of Lewiston in Androscoggin County, though my work takes me throughout the state. I am testifying today regarding the Health & Human Services provisions of the Governor's biennial budget.

MIRC is a statewide coalition of almost a hundred member organizations, including a couple dozen Ethnic Community-Based Organizations (ECBOs). Our mission is to enhance the lives of Maine's immigrant communities, which will lead to a stronger Maine overall. We accomplish this by advocacy, collaboration, and information sharing.

For several years now, one of MIRC's key legislative priorities has been the expansion of access to the MaineCare program regardless of immigration status. We believe Mainers include native-born residents, indigenous residents, immigrants, asylees, asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented individuals; they all contribute to the economic and cultural vitality of our state.

Unfortunately, though we all know Maine is a great place to live, many of our fellow Mainers still struggle with healthcare access. Though MaineCare was expanded to children and pregnant asylum seekers last year, other adults are still waiting. A few simultaneous crises are making the situation even more dire in early 2023.

Recently, up to 1,000 workers have been impacted by Abbott's decision to not renew the contracts of workers they employed via staffing agencies. Hundreds of asylum-seeking families have been affected, including mixed-status households. These workers include people who have work authorization but are not sure how to access the unemployment benefits they are entitled to receive. With the news delivered by text message, they went from having steady, good-paying jobs to no income whatsoever.

At the same time, the average Maine family with SNAP recipients will be losing \$190/month in SNAP benefits starting next month with the unwinding of the federal public health emergency. Food costs are up ten percent from last year, so the impact will be especially pronounced. In addition to more families and individuals going hungry with this reduction in food allowances, this policy change will also impact Maine's food banks (who will be strained like never before) and grocery stores (who may have to reduce their workforce due to decreased business).

All of this is happening while there is still an unrelenting housing crisis in Maine. Hundreds of asylum-seeking individuals and families are sleeping in contracted motel rooms, in overflowing

city shelters, in church basements, or even outdoors on the streets. A new AVESTA Housing project in South Portland will soon provide several dozen units of housing for asylum seekers. However, an AVESTA spokesman said they received over 1,000 applications for the 52 units. The need is so much greater than the availability right now, and that is true for Mainers of all backgrounds. I am also personally impacted by the housing shortage, as I will be looking for a new place to live this summer; that prospect is so daunting and intimidating right now, and I say that as someone that has a good job and no children; I cannot fathom the stress that people who are unauthorized to work and has children may have.

One way to lessen the stress of Maine's immigrant community, though, would be to the expansion of healthcare access regardless of immigration status. As it is, adult asylum seekers who need healthcare services are often forced to seek emergency care rather than preventative care, which is not a good solution for anyone. If they had access to MaineCare, it is more likely they will become economically self-sufficient and healthier individuals. And isn't that the goal?

All that to say we encourage you to ensure MaineCare is expanded to all low-income individuals who need it. That would enhance the lives of Maine's immigrant communities, which would lead to a stronger Maine for us all; indeed, the stated mission of my organization, MIRC. Thank you for your consideration on this matter. Feel free to email me (tobinw@maineimmigrantrights.org) should you have any questions or feedback.

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