

March 20, 2023

To the Honorable Members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement, and Business:

I am providing this written testimony in support of **LD 787, An Act to Create the New Maine Resident Service Coordination Program in the Department of Economic and Community Development**. There is an on-going, urgent need for statewide coordination of services for the hundreds of asylum seeker families arriving in our Southern Maine communities.

My testimony will focus on the need to connect these new Maine residents with job opportunities. I have worked as a human resources and workforce development professional in Maine, Massachusetts, and Oregon for thirty-three (33) years. Currently, I work as Director of Human Resources for First Atlantic Healthcare which operates nursing homes and assisted living facilities throughout Maine. We have literally hundreds of jobs open at any given time, many of which could be perfect first job opportunities for these new residents to our state. We have New Mainers among our current workforce, today, and we know that the opportunities we have could be better realized if there was workforce development coordination and support at the state level that would help us better connect with these new arrivals who are looking to go to work.

I will point to two models that you might wish to consider when developing programs to address the needs. And when I say “needs”, I’m not just talking about the needs of these newest residents to our state who need jobs; I’m also talking about the needs of many, many employers in Maine who continue to have job vacancies due to a lack of workers.

The first model is the federal Job Corps program. Using this model, a large group of individuals live together in a campus environment, residing in dormitories where they eat together as a community in cafeterias – many which are staffed by culinary arts students. While learning the skills needed for a new job (i.e., C.N.A., welding, culinary arts, business management, etc.), residents are also provided with a wide array of social support services, such as English as a Second Language classes, medical and counseling services, life-skills training on topics such as learning how to find an apartment and budget for living independently. Some Job Corps Centers have on-site daycare centers. In Maine, we have two such places: Penobscot Job Corps Center in Bangor, and Loring Job Corps Center in Limestone, Maine. I have experience working for both Centers, and I can imagine that a center organized around a large group of asylum-seeking families could be one potential solution. Obviously, this would require an already existing facility, and while I wish I could point to an available location in Maine, I do not have personal knowledge of where this might exist. Thinking on a more practical level (since it is probably unlikely that a Job Corps Center could be quickly set up solely to serve Maine’s newest residents), one way to support a portion of those in need would be to make sure that those already in the population that the Job Corps Program serves are made aware of this opportunity, and that if extra support for them could possibly be provided through already existing programs, it might provide some much needed immediate relief – especially because the program does provide housing. The Job Corps program serves individuals ages 16 to 24 years of age. More information can be found here: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/jobcorps>

The second model is one that I just became aware of on a recent trip to Las Vegas, where the state of Nevada has a Governor's Office for New Americans. Information from their website states that the Office of New Americans seeks to foster opportunities for these populations (immigrants, refugees and aspiring Americans) to ascend the economic ladder. One of the programs run by this office is the Skilled Immigrant Integration Program which has a mission of helping to create and expand proven and promising approaches that support communities in developing immigrant and refugee workforce inclusion. More information can be found here: <https://ona.nv.gov/>

Lastly, I will add that I cannot stress enough how important it is for the state of Maine to take over and manage the coordination of all the services needed by this population. I fully support the good work of Mufalo Chitham of the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, and Kristen Dow, Director of Health and Human Services for the City of Portland as they continue their urgent calls for help and support. They are on the front lines of this humanitarian crisis, and I urge you to listen and respond to their calls for help. I can't think of any other more pressing issue in our great state that needs more immediate attention than this one. Thank you for bringing this bill forward for further consideration.

Sincerely,

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