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**Testimony in Support of LD 1050-Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal
Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers**

Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
March 21, 2023

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Committee on Labor and Housing,

My name is Eamonn Dundon, and I am the Director of Advocacy of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. We represent 1,300 businesses in our region who employ over 65,000 Mainers. We are submitting this written testimony today to express our organization's strongest support for LD 1050.

We have a tremendous and acute challenge in Maine, providing services through overwhelmed municipalities and charitable organizations to the thousands of New Mainers that have arrived here in the last few years due to the pandemic and failures in federal immigration policy. We also have an unimaginable opportunity to stem demographic declines and grow the economic pie for all Mainers. The one missing piece is a bridge to actualize this apparent and ready solution for this unyielding and growing challenge. This legislation represents a way to build that bridge.

Last week we hosted our monthly Eggs & Issues breakfast on the topic of welcoming New Mainers into the workforce¹. The panel, which included Danielle West from the City of Portland, Tim Matheney from South Portland Public Schools, Mufalo Chitam from the Maine Immigrants Rights Coalition, and Luke Holden from Luke's Lobster, described to us the enormous burden that has been placed on our municipalities, school districts, and service providers who are having to address failures of a national scale at a local level. All of them were unanimous in their support for welcoming these communities to our state, but they were similarly united in their frustration with a lack of state and federal systems to support their good work. For instance, we heard that the average family that has been sheltered in a hotel over the last few years has cost over \$14,000 in public assistance monthly. This type of support is unsustainable.

Luckily, we have a solution. New Mainers want nothing more than to bring their professional and life experiences to bear in Maine's workforce, but as you well know they are prevented from doing so due to a misguided and uninformed federal law that handcuffs our ability to grow our workforce. Luke Holden, from Luke's Lobster, is one example of an employer who has tried to rise to this challenge with his *Lift All Boats* initiative which gives New Mainers the opportunity for exposure to our heritage lobster industry. There are hundreds of more employers like Luke who would be similarly welcoming if this federal barrier was removed. We must give those employers that chance.

We are supportive of legislation sponsored by Senator Collins, Senator King, and Representative Pingree to find a long-term fix to this gap in federal law, but we need to attempt every route to bring immediate relief to New Mainers, municipalities and organizations supporting them, businesses who are desperate to hire them, and the entire workforce of Maine which needs to grow. This avenue, while admittedly a long

¹ Recording of the event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JosL-XE4zG4&ab_channel=PortlandRegionalChamberofCommerce



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shot, gives us that chance. We thank you for your time and commitment to all Mainers, and we ask for your expeditious approval of this important legislation.