



Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

Testimony

In Support

LD 1050: Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers

John Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association

Before the Labor and Housing Committee

March 21, 2023

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

My name is John Kosinski (he/him) and I am proud to serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

I am here to testify on behalf of the MEA in support of LD 1050, Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers. We have concerns what is called for in this resolve may be contrary to federal law and therefore pre-empted, but we certainly support the underlying issue of allowing asylum-seekers present in Maine to be eligible to work sooner than what is currently allowed.

Asylum-seekers come to this country seeking a better life. Many are fleeing horrible conditions. They may have been threatened, their basic security may have been at risk. Many make the frightening decision to pick up, journey to someplace different, in search of a better life, anywhere they can find it. Many experience harrowing journeys and develop further scars of trauma along the way.

And yet when they arrive in the United States, they are then forced to live from charity and the good will of others. Church groups, civic groups, tireless individuals – all come together to try to provide help, guidance and a friendly face to new families searching for peace in a new land.

Throughout southern Maine, we are seeing an increase in asylum-seekers among the student population and public schools are being tested with new challenges. But perhaps the biggest challenge is the housing insecurity many of these students face as families are shuffled around between hotel rooms, apartments, church basements, gymnasiums. As students move so might the responsibility of the public school. Allowing asylum-seekers to work sooner will only help address the housing insecurity felt broadly among asylum-seekers. Allowing asylum-seekers to be authorized to work sooner than six months will not solve housing insecurity for this population, but it will certainly help bring stability to some of the students public schools are trying hard to help.

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There are bills in Congress to address this issue. Senator Collins has sponsored The Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Act of 2023 to allow asylum-seekers to see work permits 30 days after arrival. Senator Angus King is a co-sponsor.¹ And Congresswoman Pingree has sponsored similar if not identical legislation in the House.² We are hopeful our delegation can help usher this through Congress and we encourage legislators supportive of LD 1050 to share their support of this federal legislation with their elected leaders in Washington, DC.

While it takes some time for asylum seekers to adjust to being in their new home, our state is stronger for the new perspectives and experiences they bring to our communities and schools. By eliminating the wait to work, we can make their transition to Maine smoother.

Thank you for your time and your service to the people of Maine. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

¹ Please see, Portland Press Herald, February 4, 2023, found here: [Maine lawmakers renew push for faster work permits for asylum seekers - Portland Press Herald](#)

² Please, Press Release from the Office of Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, March 1, 2023, found here: [Congresswoman Pingree Renews Push to Speed Up Asylum Seeker Work Authorization Process | U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree \(house.gov\)](#)