

**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”**

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Good afternoon, Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is James Myall; I’m an Economic Policy Analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy. I’m here to testify in support of LD 1050 “Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers.” The current bar on employment for asylum seekers and other immigrants creates needless hardship of individuals and holds back our economy, particularly at this time of low unemployment. We support both a change in federal law, and the intention of this bill to get a waiver from that law until it is changed.

Immigrants are a great asset Maine’s economy. Mainers who have arrived from other countries work in every area of our labor force, from health care to hospitality. Many contribute in other ways, as volunteers and generally as community members. Research shows that immigrants are a key component of a healthy and vibrant economy.<sup>1</sup> Immigrants are known to drive innovation,<sup>2</sup> and start businesses at higher rates than native-born Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past twenty years, immigrants to Maine have been younger, more educated and more likely to be employed than native-born Mainers (see Table 1). In other words, immigrants have many of the characteristics our employers and economy are looking for. We need to be welcoming these new arrivals and helping them to succeed. Instead, our current system bars asylum-seekers from employment, despite the fact that many are eager to do contribute to our economy and support themselves financially.

In addition to the impact on our economy, the current rule creates a real hardship for those impacted. The obvious financial difficulty of not being able to earn money through employment results in increased hunger, difficulty finding housing, and problems accessing health care. What’s more, the inability to work leads to isolation, depression, and other mental health problems that add to the trauma many asylees already experienced in their home countries.<sup>4</sup>

As I’m sure many of you are aware, this personal and familial hardship is especially acute right now, with many new arrivals in Portland who are struggling to find shelter without any federal or state assistance.

LD 1050 would relieve Maine, its residents, and its economy from the burden of this unnecessarily restrictive law.

I urge you to vote “ought to pass” on the legislation. Thank you for your time. I’m happy to answer any questions.

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**Table 1: Recent Immigrants to Maine are Young, Educated, and Fill Critical Jobs**

	Native-born Mainers	Immigrants since 2000
Median age	44 years	30 years
Share with a college degree	25%	30%
Employed (16 and older)	60%	67%
Works in hospitals	4%	5%
Works in care facilities	2%	3%
Works in hospitality	7%	10%

*Source: MECEP analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data, 2017-2021 using the Integrated Public Use Microdata System (IPUMS).*

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary see “The Effects of Immigration on the United States Economy,” University of Pennsylvania, June 27, 2016. <https://budgetmodel.wharton.upenn.edu/issues/2016/1/27/the-effects-of-immigration-on-the-united-states-economy>

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Hunt and Marjolaine Gauthier-Loiselle, “How Much Does Immigration Boost Innovation?” *American Economic Journal: Macroeconomics* 2 (April 2010): 31–56. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/mac.2.2.31>

<sup>3</sup> Dan Kosten, “Immigrants as Economic Contributors: Immigrant Entrepreneurs,” *National Immigration Forum*. July 11, 2018. <https://immigrationforum.org/article/immigrants-as-economic-contributors-immigrant-entrepreneurs/>

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, “At Least Let Them Work: The Denial of Work Authorization and Assistance for Asylum Seekers in the United States.” Nov 13, 2013. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/11/12/least-let-them-work/denial-work-authorization-and-assistance-asylum-seekers-united>