



Testimony of Joby Thoyalil, Maine Business Immigration Coalition
In Support of LD 199, An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by
Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program
March 28, 2023

Good afternoon Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the joint standing committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Joby Thoyalil and I am testifying on behalf of the Maine Business Immigration Coalition (MeBIC) in *strong support* of LD 199 - An Act to Improve the Health of Maine Residents by Removing Exclusions to the MaineCare Program.

MeBIC is Maine's only resource dedicated to providing information, education and advocacy on immigration and related issues from the business and economic perspective. In 2021, nearly 100 Maine businesses, chambers of commerce, trade associations, and higher education institutions signed the Maine Compact on Immigration¹ urging state leaders to “adopt policies and practices to help Maine become a destination of choice for immigrants to the U.S. and that provide an environment where immigrants can reach their full potential in our state.” LD 199 clearly represents such a policy.

Maine is the nation's oldest state. With our low birth rates, Maine had the dubious distinction of being projected to hit the tipping point of more people being over age 65 than under age 18, a full 15 years ahead of the rest of New England.² Immigrants have been key to stemming our population decline over the past few decades and their contributions to our workforce and economy have been vital. Immigrants in Maine earn an estimated \$1.6 billion in household income and contribute \$441 million in federal, state, and local taxes.³ Immigrant workers are disproportionately represented in essential jobs, including working in food processing, agriculture, grocery stores, and providing health and home care services. Despite their contributions to our local and state economies as workers, consumers, and taxpayers, too many are excluded from the social safety net the rest of us depend on should we fall on hard times.

¹ <https://www.mecomcompact.org/>

² <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/new-england-public-policy-center-regional-briefs/2019/aging-and-declining-populations-in-northern-new-england.aspx>

³ <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/maine/>

When Congress decided to remake the federal welfare system in 1996, it did so largely on the backs of immigrants. A majority of the financial savings of federal welfare reform was accomplished by taking benefits away from immigrants.

Since then, permanent residents who have had their "green cards" for less than five years are ineligible for most federal public benefits, as are asylum seekers, those with Temporary Protected Status who have been living here legally - in most cases for two decades or more, those with DACA who came to the U.S. as children, spouses, and children of U.S. citizens who are in the process of applying for residency, and myriad other categories of immigrants. Despite working and paying taxes, federal law prohibits these and other immigrants from accessing most public benefits.

Maine has fortunately decided to cover some of these people, including children, people with disabilities, and pregnant people. But many of Maine's immigrants ineligible under federal public benefits eligibility law remain left out.

Many immigrants work in full-time jobs that don't provide health insurance and don't pay enough to lift them out of poverty. As a result, when ill, many delay or avoid care because they fear they will be unable to pay the medical costs. Expanding MaineCare to all income-eligible immigrants will help Maine's immigrants get health care sooner, to prevent or catch illness before it becomes more serious, more devastating to them and their families, and more costly to treat. Expanded MaineCare will lead to healthier families and communities in general, and to a healthier workforce.

I urge you to pass LD 199 because it is both the right thing to do for those who are currently left behind, but also because it is an investment in our future workforce and economy.