

12 May 2023

## Testimony in support of LD1710

My name is Charlie Gauvin. I am testifying in support of LD1710 on behalf of myself and my organization – the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC), a coalition of 100+ member organizations representing the interests and promoting the welfare of Maine's immigrant communities. As Maine continues to see new arrivals to the state in the form of unprecedented numbers of asylum seekers along with refugees and humanitarian parolees, the shortage of affordable and accessible housing feels increasingly acute as these people struggle to find the secure foundations of stable housing from which they can build their futures here.

As the Resettlement and Integration Manager at MIRC, my work focuses primarily on supporting asylum seekers' resettlement to Maine by advocating for and working on the ground to ensure access to temporary, transitional, and permanent housing. The former two types are mainly in the form of shelters – unlike refugees and humanitarian parolees (the program through which Afghan and Ukrainian individuals have come to the US), asylum seekers have restricted access to work authorization. They must wait six months following the filing of their asylum application, which in itself can take up to a year to prepare in light of the limited resources for free and low-cost immigration legal support available in Maine. This means that asylum seeking individuals and families are further restricted in the ability to rent apartments as they are forced to search for units that fall within General Assistance rent limits, which vary across municipalities but generally speaking lag behind the increase in market rental prices across the state.

Even when asylum seekers and those who work to support their housing navigation find units that can be paid for General Assistance, which itself is an increasingly difficult feat, municipal offices often lack the leverage or ability to require landlords to accept GA payments. Many landlords hold negative assumptions about working with GA offices, and some have actually had negative experiences with those programs, and again municipalities find themselves with a lack of procedural recourse to work with landlords on making GA payments work for all parties.

Working as closely as I do with the temporary and transitional housing efforts to support asylum seekers, I see every day the energy, time, money, and admirable dedication that go into those projects, but important as those shelter and hotel systems are to ensure people have a roof over their heads, they do not represent the end goal for these new arrivals or for the municipalities in which that they arrive. As long as these These folks come to Maine for safety, security, and the promise of a brighter future, not to be reliant on the emergency shelter systems, donations, and public benefits of Maine towns, cities, and people. They are resilient and resourceful, but have more to offer than their ability to survive in difficult congregate living settings. Strengthening General Assistance systems by giving municipalities better mechanisms to work with landlords on accepting GA payments for rental units is a crucial step in paving the way for asylum seekers and all Mainers to find the security and stability to realize their full potential to contribute to the greater welfare of this wonderful state.

Thank you for your work to address this crucially important issue,

Charlie Gauvin  
Resettlement and Integration Manager  
Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition