



1/29/2024

**Re: LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans**

Kerem Durdag offers the following testimony in favor of LD 946, “**LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans**”.

Members of the Committee on State and Local Government, thank you for giving me the opportunity to provide written testimony. My name is Kerem Durdag and I am CEO of Biddeford Internet Corporation d/b/a GWI.

For 30 years, GWI ([www.gwi.net](http://www.gwi.net)) has been a leader in providing affordable internet and telecommunications services in both the residential and commercial space, emphasizing community relationships. Founded on the belief that internet access is a right for all, GWI as an internet service provider (ISP) is committed to offering quality service with principles of net neutrality, open access, and data privacy and is the first Broadband Carrier with B Corporation certification.

GWI builds 21st century infrastructure which communities depend on to conduct their lives and grow their economy. These networks are vital for everyone but in particular, the rural areas where the need is most prevalent. Every day GWI measures their performance not just on profit but on the positive impact our network has on the communities they passionately serve.

GWI has been servicing all 16 counties in Maine with residential and business internet and voice services. Additionally we have a very significant presence in Vermont. Finally, we have a presence in New Hampshire also.

I am also an Immigrant.

The Immigrant is a member of Maine society. Through trials and tribulations that define the self and family, these community members sought to leave their birth countries behind to affirm their lives in a new environment. And this environment where, as an ideal, the toxic dynamics of nepotism, corruption, dysfunctional state and national institutions and the lack of infrastructure and opportunity are significantly less. The ideal is one of equality and welcome. The ideal is one that via the intersection of the social contract and belief in self, the immigrant can define the present to be what they desire. The ideal is one of self-actualization on terms that are determined by yourself.

The Immigrant is a necessity to Maine.

The Immigrant is driven by an elemental desire to contribute to Maine because Maine has provided shelter and a path of living.

The Immigrant feels the need to create multigenerational change because in it lies the continuing story of traversing land and ocean for family and friends. I, we, have traveled to another soil far from our birth

lands because we wanted a better life for ourselves and our children; thoughts that were amorphous and coalesced in immutable ways. We rebirthed ourselves. Yes, we rebirthed ourselves.

And so the Immigrant in Maine owns businesses, are elected officials, are parents sending their kids to school, themselves go to college and work two other jobs at the same time and can articulate their success when provided the platform. They create opportunities. They are part of *life*. They make their mark. They participate and learn. They are members of the Maine compact on being decent, hard working and conscious of the world at large. The immigrant community has extended its hand so that it matters to the Maine community.

In Maine, the immigrant business owner (as an example of impact and which has happened largely adhoc over the last 20 years and only recently has been at the receiving end of state and local assistance) has the following characteristics:

- 2,368 immigrant business owners accounted for 2 percent of all self-employed Maine residents in 2018 owned businesses that generate \$48 million in annual revenue. Given that first-generation immigrants create about 25% of new U.S. firms, the current small percentage of immigrants in Maine holds a significant lever to grow the Maine economy if the size of the community increased.
- 28,129 immigrant workers comprised 4 percent of the labor force in 2018; which means that about 8% of the immigrant population starts their own businesses today.

6% of the computer and math jobs are from the immigrant community (in 2018, 47,418 immigrants were in Maine) that comprised 4 percent of the population. That is a large fulcrum point. More than one-third (35 percent) of adult immigrants had a college degree or more education in 2018, while under one-fifth (18 percent) had less than a high school diploma.

And yet, the immigrant entrepreneur (whose significant population is a community of color) struggles to be part of the overall economic development conversation in boardrooms, executive management representation in companies, in the makeup of classes, seminar and webinars (either as presenters or in the audience) that are offered for training and knowledge-sharing, in the policies and procedures that would inculcate and sustain diversity and inclusion in for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and in the overall tenor of the measured progress benchmarks for the state of Maine. So we struggle to be part of the conversation even when the conversation is about us.

So the Immigrant in Maine is one who, together with striving to create a life, also strives to include his and her voice. She is a subject of policy analysis and papers, in-depth insights about the value she brings to Maine society, but the translation from those studies to actual and definable tools is vastly under-resourced or absent (and lest it be thought that there are simply insignificant numbers of Mainers who do not believe that immigrants should be part of the Maine fabric, I invite them to read public comments when articles about this topic are posted in online forums). At the end of the day, the Immigrant is part of the story of Maine, albeit a participant in various levels of tension, and yet he is often marginalized in the broader ethos (how often do we as Maine society talk about how the Somali community has played its role in revitalizing Lewiston? how often do we as Maine society acknowledge the Hispanic and central African community in opening up the world of Portland?)

There is a need to find solutions to societal challenges on a massive scale of which Maine needs to (and can) be ready to contribute. For all of these dimensions, not being aware of the presence of the Immigrant that needs to be part of these efforts, is a lazy excuse of not wanting to step out of the

comfort of the status quo. And the status quo, as history is a wise guide, is a place where the oxygen of growth and substance is utterly starved.

We belong to each other. And in that belonging is meaning.

Maine needs to realize the connective tissue to its success is in its ability to be a society that cares, is progressive in its intentions to create solutions, and can be a functional organism that integrates the multiplicity of cultural inclusion. Its future depends on it.

And I have not even talked about the challenges of affordable housing, the coordination urgency asymptotically required between towns and municipalities, the absolute and utter chaos in supporting refugees and asylees and finding pathways to feed and clothes member of the human society that are us. *It is chaos out in those local communities no matter how noble their intentions.* When you have Immigrants bouncing around from agency to agency, entity to entity, personal contact to personal contact, to try to actualize their lives, that is wrong. That is an abrogation of our responsibilities as a society.

And when you have all the miasma of small non-profits aspiring to provide support, succor and services to the Immigrants, it makes for a very inefficient eco-system on a good day. On a bad day, it is soul crushing.

It is perhaps easy to say that efforts need to be dealt on a local basis; I vehemently disagree. The scale of the challenge requires an architecture that is at scale, that can affect local activities. That is the State of Maine.

Which brings me to LD 2167, an effort I have been proud to contribute energy and perspective to with all that I am capable of. My enormous gratitude to Sen. Rick Bennett to champion this effort; my deepest and sincerest appreciation to Governor Janet Mills to make this a priority and issue the executive order.

There is an absolute need for an Officer of New Americans that contributes state resources so that we as a Maine society can drive economic, social and cultural growth and evolution in a state like Maine because the fundamental question is about relevance and survival in the 21st century) by having us be inclusive and diverse. This office, with relevant funding will have to (it will!) do the following:

- Convene stakeholders, create a workflow to discover, identify granularly the issues, spend 6 months and come up with a statewide tactical 10 year strategic plan and road-map that can be implemented in tranches with realism and aspiration. What is required is not a report. What is the output of this activity is an actionable plan. **This is the economic imperative.**
- Coordinate activities between the towns and municipalities. Be on phone calls. Meet. Share resource information. Play a role in reducing conflicts of interest, wanton waste and inefficiencies. Participate with the full credit and backing of the State of Maine to build bridges into communities, reinforce relationships, sow the seeds of entrenching an infrastructure of support, nurturing and coordinating amongst the various Immigrant communities so that we can knit the fabric society together. **This is the social imperative.**
- Workforce development. Workforce development. Workforce development. That is inclusive and which results in multigenerational inclusive work eco-systems (such as in construction,

health systems, education, technology, entrepreneurship). Lean in. Coordinate. Encourage. Distribute funds to show commitment. **This is the cultural imperative**

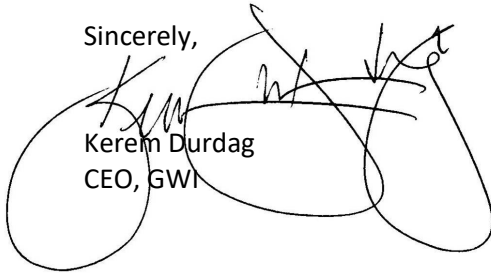
- Be present. Have agency. Demonstrate intentionality. Move the ball. Distribute some funds to show commitment. Knit together cooperation, collaboration and results that fulfill the obligation we have to each other to be accepting, diverse, inclusive and human. **This is the moral imperative.**

At the end of this collective journey of us, we are going to be remembered by Talmudic saying of: when you affect a life, you affect a universe. The State of Maine needs to now participate together with all the stakeholders to carry this responsibility onward.

Make LD 2167 LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans" a reality. It is time.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,



Kerem Durdag  
CEO, GWI