

Testimony from Tobin Williamson regarding:  
**LD 2167: An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans**

Sponsored By: Representative Deqa Dhalac of South Portland

Dear Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and Members of the Committee on State and Local Government:

My name is Tobin Williamson and I live in Westbrook. I am writing to encourage you to support LD 2167. In my job, I am frequently asked how many immigrants there are in Maine, how many have arrived in recent years, how they fit into the workforce, what the state is doing to coordinate things, and so on. Thus far, these questions have not really had a clear, satisfactory answer. After reading this legislation, though, I am confident that it will be a tremendous step forward.

During the O.N.A. planning phase, I was impressed with how members of the GOPIF team (e.g., Greg Payne, Georges Makoko, Erica Carley Harris, and Hannah Pingree) engaged with members of immigrant communities throughout the state. They met with groups like York County Community Action, the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, Gateway Community Services, and more in towns and cities throughout Maine. The level of community engagement, conversation, and research they did in preparation of this plan is to be commended.

One of the duties of the proposed office in this bill is "collecting and analyzing relevant data." Another duty is "coordinating with all relevant local, state and federal government agencies." These two duties are linked in that until now, there has not been a central agency that works on data collection about new arrivals in the state. For example: we would often get numbers from municipal governments or community organizations in Portland, in Brunswick, in Westbrook, in Saco, in Lewiston, in Freeport... but it would come at different times, or there would be different collection criteria. People frequently move between locations, so there could be undercounts or overcounts. Having accurate data collection would be important not just for keeping track of who is where, but also for things like municipalities or organizations applying for grants or federal funding.

Additionally, the types of services offered by disparate municipalities and community organizations has been a challenge to coordinate. Who offers housing navigation in Portland? Healthcare clinics in Biddeford? Transportation services in Brunswick? English courses in Auburn? For service providers working with immigrant communities (including my employer, the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition), it has been almost impossible to keep up with. The language in this bill makes it clear the proposed Office will work to promote and coordinate activities like workforce training, language learning, legal services, and other tools essential to long-term economic and civic integration of immigrants in the State. This sort of collaboration and coordination is much needed, especially as Maine towns continue to have an increasingly large and diverse group of immigrant communities.

I am also pleased to see the creation of an Office of New Americans Advisory Council. More than half the members on the 19-person council would come from immigrant communities, with other members representing schools, adult education programs, small and large businesses, refugee resettlement providers, legal providers, housing providers, workforce development officials, and municipalities. It sounds like this diverse group will be a good representative of immigrant communities and their service providers throughout the state as they guide the work of this office and its future staff.

There are two additional components of this bill that I really appreciate and want to point out to your Committee. First, LD 2167 is bipartisan, as the cosponsors include legislators from both parties; in the current political climate, that is always a welcome development. Second, Maine would become the nineteenth state to join the national Office of New Americans State Network; by working with other states across the country, Maine can learn best practices from them on how to offer long-time civic and economic integration of immigrant communities.

This legislation has come to fruition thanks to the efforts of a lot of people – Governor Mills, Representative Dhalac and the cosponsors, the GOPIF team, and community members and organizations throughout Maine and beyond who provided input during the planning process. I hope that you will vote to pass LD 2167 so Maine can become the next state with an Office of New Americans. Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

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