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MAINE AFL-CIO

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Testimony of Maine AFL-CIO Apprenticeship and Workforce Equity Director, Sam Boss, to Support L.D. 2167, "An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans "

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State & Local Government. My name is Sam Boss and I am the Apprenticeship and Workforce Equity Director at the Maine AFL-CIO, which represents 40,000 working people in Maine. We work to improve the lives and working conditions of our members and all working people. I am here to testify in support of LD 2167.

To explain why we support the establishment of an Office of New Americans, I'd like to share my perspective as someone who has worked closely with immigrant communities, both in my current job and over years of community work in Lewiston-Auburn. In my role at the AFL-CIO, I coordinate the Union Construction Academy pre-apprenticeship program, which prepares participants for careers with Maine Building and Construction Trades Unions. Our graduates gain certifications and training they need to succeed as electricians, ironworkers, carpenters, laborers, elevator constructors, public works staff, and a variety of other high-wage, in-demand jobs. One of the goals for our Union Construction Academy program is to provide a pathway into the trades for folks who historically have had limited access to the great pay and benefits that these careers can provide. This includes women, low-income folks, people of color, individuals in recovery, and New Americans.

We are committed to helping these populations gain entry into good careers in the trades in part because we believe it is the right thing to do. But we are also committed to this initiative because we know we need to increase the number of skilled tradespeople in Maine in order to meet our state's needs for better infrastructure, more housing, and clean energy. We can't develop the workforce we need to rise to these challenges by doing business as usual.

Since launching our pre-apprenticeship program last spring, I've talked to hundreds of highly motivated New Americans who are trained as welders, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and civil engineers – all skill sets that we could use more of in Maine. Unfortunately, many of them are not able to use their skills and training because they don't know where or how to get the certifications they need, and because they can't get enough English instruction to let them pass aptitude exams for their chosen trades.

In the absence of a centralized structure of support for immigrants in Maine, New Americans have to navigate a confusing patchwork of services offered by non-profit and municipal support agencies – many of whom are duplicating services because they're competing for grant funding. It's very difficult to keep track of who is offering what, who has openings, and which providers are reliable. It's that much more difficult for folks who are new to the country and learning English and navigating American culture for the first time. As a result of this confusion, New Americans often end up relying on word-of-mouth and informal networks of support. This can be helpful, but in many cases doing what has allowed others to get by leads New Americans to sell themselves short and end up underemployed – to survive, rather than thrive. So many of those I've talked to have defaulted into low-wage jobs that have low barriers to entry, but would love to work in the fields where they have more experience and skills to offer.

The Office of New Americans can help to coordinate services and make it easier for new arrivals to understand the range of training opportunities available to them. I am particularly excited about the provision within LD 2167 that would support expanded and improved English classes. In my experience, a lack of English skills is the primary barrier for folks who are looking to use their past experience to access better-paying and more stable employment. Access to better English instruction will help also help New Americans as they navigate healthcare, housing, and education.

To sum up, the provisions in this bill will not only help New Americans, but will also help to strengthen Maine's workforce at a critical time. I urge this committee to support LD 2167.