



January 30, 2024

Testimony on LD 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 State and Local Government Committee, my name is Hannah Pingree and I am the Director of the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF). On behalf Governor Mills, I am here today to help present LD 2167, a Governor's bill submitted by Representative Deqa Dhalac. The Governor is grateful for Representative Dhalac's leadership, as well as the bipartisan co-sponsors of this legislation.

Last August, Governor Mills [signed Executive Order number 2](#) which directed GOPIF to work with stakeholders across the state to plan for an Office of New Americans (ONA) – an office that would support the long-term economic and civic integration of immigrants in Maine. The Executive Order pointed to Maine's long-term labor market challenges fueled by our state's demographics and our current market status, with an average of two job openings for every one unemployed worker. The order also highlighted the contributions immigrants have made to the vibrancy of our communities and the strength of our economy throughout Maine's history.

Through the Governor's Executive Order, GOPIF was directed to outline the mission, structure, and scope of work of the proposed office, with the overarching goal of ensuring that Maine is effectively incorporating immigrants into its workforce and welcoming immigrants into our cities and towns to strengthen the state's economy and communities over the long-term.

Throughout the fall, GOPIF staff and state partners conducted more than 100 community engagement sessions, meeting with more than 800 individual Mainers from all 16 counties reflecting Maine's broad diversity. The team traveled from Sanford to Presque Isle, from Auburn to Cherryfield, meeting with Maine citizens and leaders who shared their ideas for the new office. Organizations and individuals who participated included representatives of Maine's immigrant communities, employers, local and state chambers of commerce members, municipalities, school administrative leaders and teaching staff, higher education institutions, community-based organizations, healthcare and service providers, and state agency leadership.

As part of the process, GOPIF also established a public email newsletter, website, and online comment form so that any interested individual or group could follow the process and provide feedback, and we held a public webinar on September 6, 2023 to describe the process.

The planning process was supported by key agency leadership across state government and higher education who provided ongoing guidance on the structure and priorities. This included the Department of Economic and Community Development; Department of Labor; Department of Health and Human Services; Department of Education; Department of Professional and Financial Regulation; Department of Administrative and Financial Services; Maine Housing; the Maine Community College System and the University of Maine System.

The state also received important background and guidance from the Office of New Americans State Network, a consortium of U.S. states with dedicated offices or staff for coordinating immigrant integration. The Network is coordinated by a partnership of two organizations, World Education Services and the American Immigration Council. Pursuant to Governor Mills' Executive Order, Maine became the 19th state to participate in the Network, following the most recently joined states including Utah, Wisconsin, and North Dakota.

On January 19th Governor Mills released the publicly available ONA plan. The plan includes a variety of recommendations and reflects the strong consensus on the need to improve how Maine welcomes, introduces and integrates New Americans into our communities and economy.

Priorities for the new office, emphasized by stakeholders, and outlined in the legislation and detailed in the plan, include:

- Strengthening English-language acquisition opportunities;
- Building workforce pathways and support for entrepreneurs;
- Improving coordination between organizations, programs, and entities that work with immigrants, including municipalities, schools, and employers;
- Tracking federal immigration policy and supporting collaboration with Maine's Congressional delegation on policies that benefit the state; and
- Improving Maine's data about its immigrant populations.

The plan recommends that the ONA initially be established within the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. GOPIF was created by Governor Janet Mills to encourage collaboration across State agencies, stakeholders, and the public to recommend innovative policy solutions for critical issues facing Maine. Like several initiatives already housed within the office such as the Cabinet on Aging, the Children's Cabinet, and the Maine Climate Council, the policy priorities outlined in the ONA plan are not housed within a single agency. The Departments of Labor, Economic and Community Development, Health and Human Services, Professional and Financial Regulation, and Education all engage on various policy issues that overlap with recommended ONA priorities. Establishing the office in GOPIF also mirrors the ONA formation process in other states.

Lastly, the plan and bill before you creates an advisory committee to the ONA to ensure regular feedback and dialog with key stakeholders – including immigrant community members, employers, municipalities, and school districts. GOPIF supports similar committees and councils, including the Early Childhood Advisory Council and multiple working groups of the Maine Climate Council, among others.

I thank the committee for its time, and I urge you to support this important effort.