



# **MAINE AFL-CIO**

*A Union of Unions Standing for Maine Workers*

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Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and honorable members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Sam Boss and I am the Apprenticeship and Workforce Director at the Maine AFL-CIO, a state federation of over 160 local labor unions representing over 40,000 working people and retirees across the state. I am here to testify in support of LD 471.

As the Apprenticeship and Workforce Director at the Maine AFL-CIO, I oversee our efforts to help Mainers access stable careers with family sustaining pay and benefits. To advance that goal, we run a pre-apprenticeship called the Union Construction Academy, an intensive five-week program that offers hands-on training, certifications, and soft skills that will allow participants to be successful in careers in construction and manufacturing. In addition to providing a pathway into great work for program graduates, the Union Construction Academy also helps Maine to address a shortage of skilled workers and tradespeople in the state. In order to construct new housing, weatherize buildings, improve our grid, and fix outdated infrastructure, we desperately need more qualified people in the trades.

The Union Construction Academy is open and advertised to people of all backgrounds, and many of the applications I receive come from immigrants and refugees. Many of those individuals are already highly skilled in a trade, but lack the English skills to follow technical instructions and operate safely in a fast-paced construction environment. Nearly all of these individuals are already taking classes to improve their English, but they typically progress slowly because they are only in class for a few hours every week. They also don't get much time to practice their conversational English, because when they're not in class they are working in low-wage jobs either on their own or with other non-native English speakers. In this way, experienced tradespeople end up underemployed, and Maine loses out on the benefit of their skills in the trades and their potential contributions to our economy.

An example from one of our pre-apprenticeship sessions from last year illustrates what a difference strong English skills can make to overall outcomes for individuals and our workforce. One of our

training sessions included six refugees from Afghanistan. All of them had worked closely with our US troops as members of the Afghan Air Force, and they had significant experience flying or maintaining some of the most sophisticated military aircrafts in the world. Of those six, one individual, a former blackhawk helicopter who spoke excellent English, transitioned quickly into a position as an Elevator Constructor, where he could put his technical know-how to use. The five other students, whose English was not as strong, have had a much harder time getting stable employment. Their qualifications and technical skills are just as good, but they haven't been able to get their foot in the door because of the language barrier.

Access to the intensive English courses outlined in this Bill will accelerate the process of integration for immigrants and refugees, and allow them to join Maine's workforce in critical positions in the trades and other professions where we need skilled workers. I urge you to support LD 471.