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January 30, 2024

Testimony of Rep. Deqa Dhalac introducing
LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by
Establishing an Office of New Americans
Before the Joint Select Committee on State and Local Government

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, I am Deqa Dhalac, representing House District 120, part of the City of South Portland. I am proud to be before you today to present **LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans.**

In August of last year, Governor Mills directed the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) to work with a host of stakeholders to establish a plan for the Office of New Americans (ONA). Those included in that conversation included other relevant State agencies, municipalities, schools and colleges, employers, community-based organizations, chambers of commerce, and immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking communities across Maine. The bill before you is the result of that incredibly thoughtful, inclusive and far-reaching work.

The bill would create an office of four people to be overseen by a 19-member advisory council that would advise the ONA on matters related to the long-term economic and civic integration of immigrants in Maine.

The plan proposes that the ONA focuses on strengthening English-language acquisition opportunities, building workforce pathways and support for entrepreneurs, improving coordination of organizations and entities that support new Mainers, including communities, schools, and employers, engaging in federal immigration policies to benefit Maine, and improving Maine's data about immigrant populations.

By establishing a central hub of information and resources for new Mainers, I believe will usher in a new era of opportunity for all of Maine. Throughout our state's history, we have been enriched by the presence of immigrants. When immigrants enter the labor force, they increase

the productive capacity of the economy and raise GDP. Their incomes rise, but so do those of people born in the United States.

In 2018, as consumers, immigrants in Maine added over a billion dollars to the state's economy and contributed almost \$200 million in state and local taxes. That same year, immigrant owned businesses generated \$15.3 million in business income. Those numbers are impressive, but they pale in comparison to the contributions immigrant communities have made even more recently.

In 2022 alone, immigrant-owned businesses generated an impressive \$48 million in annual revenue.¹ During a time when Maine faces a crippling work force shortage and an aging population, we cannot afford to allow unnecessary barriers to get in the way of folks eager to contribute.

Those of us who have made the decision to leave our home countries to make Maine our new home, either by force or of our own choice, have always had a deep desire to work and be part of a community. We came to this country, to Maine, with the hope of helping our neighbors, supporting our families and creating a meaningful life here.

Although we have achieved great things without the dedicated support of this office, just imagine what we could accomplish with it. The Office of New Americans will provide the tools, resources, and guidance needed for new Mainers to thrive and succeed. It will serve as a hub of support, connecting immigrants with vital services and opportunities for growth.

This office represents a commitment to inclusivity, diversity and the belief that every individual, regardless of their background, deserves a chance to pursue their dreams and make a positive impact on our society. Together, we can build a stronger, more vibrant Maine that embraces and celebrates the contributions of all its residents.

I am excited about the future that lies ahead for immigrants in Maine. I am confident that, with the establishment of the Office of New Americans, we will see even greater economic growth and a stronger sense of unity among all Mainers.

¹ https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/immigrants_in_maine.pdf