



Testimony from Orlina Boteva, University of Maine, Director of International Programs
In Support of **LD 2167, *An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce
by Establishing an Office of New Americans***
Jan. 30, 2024

Senator Nagle, Representative Stover, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on State & Local Government:

My name is Orlina Boteva, an immigrant from Bulgaria, who has lived and worked in Maine for more than 20 years. I serve as the Director of International Programs at the University of Maine. **I strongly support the bill to create the Office of New Americans.** In my work overseeing the Intensive English Institute at UMaine, I work directly with immigrants in our community. Daily, I see the impact of English language proficiency on access to jobs, career development, and earning potential.

The focus of the Office of New Americans to help expand, improve, and create access to English language acquisition opportunities as a workforce development mechanism is critical for our state. Maine needs capacity building for English instruction from beginning to advanced classes to serve our growing immigrant community. Additionally, we need coordination of language services in the local communities to offer more classes throughout the day, and in the evenings for working professionals.

We need this office to liaise with state and local entities to address the barriers to language education, which are transportation and childcare. We can invest in developing online language education. Combined with access to a computer, internet, and digital literacy training, immigrants can access classes from any corner of our state. This is especially important in our more remote rural communities.

The level of English language proficiency should not be a barrier to employment. We all need to consider how to simplify the hiring and onboarding process to create access to unfilled positions. It is important to remove barriers for jobs which don't require high language skills but have cumbersome language-dependent employment processes.

Learning English should not be focused only in the early stage of settling in Maine. It should continue until the individual learner has reached advanced English proficiency. This policy will address underemployment, where skilled professionals are working below their educational and career level, and ensure access to skilled-based positions, higher wages, and greater self-sufficiency.

Through relationship building between language educators and employers, Maine can offer more employment options paired with continuous English language education right at the employment

site. This strategy will help to upskill our workforce and can provide opportunities for internal promotion and higher wages. It is a model that serves both the worker and the employer.

Educated parents support the education of their children. Investing in English language education through the creation of the Office of New Americans will ensure the higher educational attainment of the next generation of Mainers. Historically, immigrant communities in the US have achieved higher educational levels and invested in the education of their children.

My personal language journey started early. I was privileged to have access to English language training before I came to the US. My advanced language proficiency opened the door to the highest level of education as well as continuous career progression. My wish is that every Maine resident has the same opportunity as I did. We can accomplish this through the creation of the Office of New Americans in our state.

Thank you for your time and allowing me to provide my testimony in support of LD 2164.