



Testimony in Support of LD 2167

An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans

January 30, 2024

Good afternoon, Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Julie Allaire. I am Chief Program Officer at Catholic Charities Maine (CCM) and oversee refugee and asylum seeker programs.

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Catholic Charities is one of Maine's largest statewide social service agencies. We have provided federally funded refugee services for over 40 years. In mid-2022, CCM began providing case management services to asylum seeking families in transitional housing through a pilot program created by the Governor's Office for Policy Innovation and the Future.

CCM programs help immigrants successfully integrate into their new communities by acquiring skills and connecting with services; thereby helping them secure employment, enrich communities and thrive. We partner with dozens of non-profits and coordinate with state and local government. In recent years, refugee resettlement has shifted away from Greater Portland to smaller cities and towns seeking to grow their workforce and offering more affordable housing options.

CCM wholeheartedly supports LD 2167 and the creation of the Office of New Americans, ONA. Benefits of the bill and the proposed ONA include:

- ONA, through its inclusion in the nationwide Office of New Americans State Network, will give Maine government direct access to information about the border, internal migration, other state practices, and a stronger voice in federal immigration conversations.
- ONA will provide state leadership on immigration issues in Maine. Its information sharing and data roles will facilitate internal government coordination – among DHHS, DOE, DOL – thereby expediting problem-solving. It will disseminate best practices to towns seeking to integrate immigrants and harness their skills.
- ONA will mobilize the expertise of immigrant groups, non-profit service providers and other constituencies in a coordinated fashion.
- ONA will accelerate immigrants' entry to Maine's workforce including in critical skill shortage areas thru expanded language and legal resources, and reducing barriers preventing skilled and licensed immigrants from working in their field of expertise.
- ONA's support will help local schools and municipalities integrate children and families so first generation immigrant families can put down solid roots. This will produce a new generation of Mainers thereby helping slow population loss and keep our state vibrant and healthy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 2167. I am happy to provide further information about CCM's work and how LD 2167 can accelerate immigrant contributions in Maine.

