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TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

LD 2167 – Ought to Pass

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

Joint Standing Committee on
State and Local Government

January 30, 2024

Senator Nagle, Representative Stover and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am Policy Counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support LD 2167.

For more than 25 years, the ACLU has been part of almost every major legal struggle on behalf of immigrants' rights, striving to fulfill the promise that all people can create a home in the United States. We have challenged laws that deny immigrants access to the courts, impose indefinite and mandatory detention, and discriminate based on nationality. We have challenged federal, state, and local immigration enforcement when they abuse people's constitutional rights, including anti-immigrant "show me your papers" laws. But we have not had as much occasion to work on the other side of the coin, to support proactive measures to make our state, and our nation, better at welcoming and integrating immigrants. This bill offers such an opportunity.

If enacted, LD 2167 would create an Office of New Americans in the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. This office would seek to improve the economic and civic integration of immigrants into Maine's workforce and communities.

The past several years have seen a plethora of efforts to better integrate immigrants into Maine's workforce, but too often, these efforts have been disjointed. Legislators have sponsored bills to help make immigrants' educational

credentials compatible with Maine's professional licensing systems; municipal and charitable organizations have run language and cultural programs; nonprofits have advocated for a range of pro-immigrant legal changes; and still other entities have done more to make Maine a place where people can make a new home. These positive efforts proceed against the shadow of a national and local history of segregating and oppressing various immigrant groups, often at the expense of their civil rights and civil liberties. Proactive integration is the opposite of targeted oppression, and this bill aims at proactive integration. For that very reason, this bill would mark a welcome departure from the worst of our history.

An Office of New Americans would play a crucial role in coordinating the state's many efforts at effective integration, serve as a data-gathering tool, and provide a central repository of resources for everyone who has just arrived in Maine. An Office of New Americans will help ensure that immigrants thrive in a way that helps solve the multiple crises that Maine faces. LD 2167 will strengthen our communities for all people who live here, whether they have roots dating back centuries or just arrived.

We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.