



IMMIGRANT LEGAL ADVOCACY PROJECT

January 30, 2024

**Testimony of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
In Support of LD 2167
“An Act to Develop Maine’s Economy and Strengthen Its
Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans”**

Good afternoon, members of the State and Local Government Committee. My name is Lisa Parisio, and I am here today from the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project, or ILAP, to urge you to support LD 2167.

ILAP is Maine’s *only* statewide immigration legal services organization. We specialize in complex, humanitarian cases, and serve those who would otherwise not have access to a lawyer, helping individuals and families achieve security and stability, enter the workforce, and make Maine home. As the only organization of our kind in the state, ILAP’s team has a unique vantage over the compounding issues that put up roadblocks for immigrants who are striving to work, raise families, and build their lives here. In turn, we see the missed opportunities for our entire Maine community, economy, and future.

Some of the major and daily challenges we face as a state include 1) lack of immigration legal services capacity; 2) lack of centralized and coordinated resources and services for immigrant communities; and 3) very significantly, the loss of efficiency and capacity in service-providing organizations like ILAP, – resulting from that lack of a coordinated resources and services hub – as we try to fill the gaps. Every human being and family has intersecting and layered needs. Without access to housing,

food, transportation, etc., it becomes more and more unlikely a person can successfully pursue their immigration case, including securing a work permit to enter the workforce. Without immigration status, life is exceedingly difficult, and people must focus on surviving rather than thriving and contributing their full potential to our state.

If ILAP can convey one thing to the Committee today about the U.S. immigration system, and what immigrant communities are facing in Maine, it is that it is incredibly difficult to even pursue your immigration case, let alone win it, without a lawyer.

Therefore, if Maine wants to help our immigrant communities secure status and work permits and successfully enter the workforce, investing in an Office of New Americans is essential in maximizing the resources we already have as well as innovating to build Maine's overall capacity to help people get on their feet.

The proposed activities of an Office of New Americans, including "Supporting the expansion of access to legal services and protections," "Partnering with ... organizations and businesses providing assistance or opportunities to immigrants," and advising all levels of government on the policy and process steps we can and must take to assist immigrant communities in entering the workforce will be transformative for Maine.

By acting as a centralized hub of information, resources, and connections, this Office will play a key role in ensuring that individuals and families can secure basic needs, immigration status, meaningful work utilizing their skills and talents, and a secure, prosperous future.

Our state, our community, and our workforce is built on individuals. This is the time to invest in each other and unlock Maine's potential. ILAP looks forward to supporting Maine's Office of New Americans any way we can. Thank you.