

126 Sewall Street  
Augusta, Maine 04330-6822  
(207) 626-7058  
www.maineequaljustice.org



**Dina Malual**  
Policy Advocate  
dmalual@mejp.org

**MEJ Testimony in Support of 2167, *An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforces by Establishing an Office of New Americans***

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Good afternoon, Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the State & Local Government Committee. My name is Dina Malual, I use she/her pronouns, and I am a Policy Advocate with Maine Equal Justice (MEJ), a nonprofit legal aid provider working to increase economic security, opportunity, and equity for people in Maine. We are pleased to testify in support of LD 2167.

MEJ is excited about the establishment of the Office of New Americans (ONA) and appreciates the Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future's (GOPIF) commitment to create long-term solutions to better support Maine's immigrant community. Amid an aging population and workforce shortages in key sectors, immigrants are important contributors to a strong economy and essential to Maine's future.

Maine Equal Justice had the opportunity to participate in two ONA listening sessions with various immigrant-led organizations from across the state. The majority of participants were in agreement: There is an absence of state level expertise around what the immigration process looks like for people with different immigration statuses, and a lack of understanding and data about who immigrant Mainers are and what their unique experiences look like navigating multiple, complex systems. Immigrants and community organizations often feel disconnected from government agencies and resources in a way that small, community-based organizations cannot resolve on their own. By working closely with immigrant Mainers and the organizations already serving them, the office can bridge the support between community-based organizations and our state agencies.

Immigrants in Maine face a myriad of barriers that can vary with different immigration statuses. Organizations such as MEJ, work as service providers addressing many challenges. However, it is not enough. Many immigrants face a unique set of challenges: limited English proficiency, professional credential recognition and recertification challenges, racism, and overall cultural differences that affect their participation and retention in the workforce.

The office should act as a liaison with various stakeholders and government agencies to improve communication and benefit from the expertise immigrants themselves and organizations that serve them bring to decisions within state government. ONA should identify and remove barriers that can be changed at the state level, including exclusions in MaineCare, SNAP, TANF, General Assistance (GA), Unemployment Insurance, child care subsidies, and other state-funded

programs that support the health, stability, and well-being of Maine immigrants and their families.

A challenge specific to asylum seekers is the long wait period for work permits. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, asylum seekers have to wait 180 days after filing an asylum application to begin work<sup>1</sup>. The extensive wait prevents asylum seekers from entering the workforce and being able to provide for themselves and their families. Despite immigration law being managed by the federal government, the legislature can support this population by advocating for equitable access to training programs, education and immigration services.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, ONA should prioritize immediate challenges that prevent immigrants from remaining in the state. The current housing crisis challenges the State's goal of attracting and retaining immigrants. Without readily affordable housing units, immigrants continue to face economic instability.<sup>3</sup>

The establishment of ONA is an opportunity to centralize and streamline immigrant support across Maine. By serving as the State's primary liaison with all relevant external stakeholders, the strategic plan points to long-term economic change that attracts and retains immigrants. We recommend GOPIF prioritize the following to successfully integrate immigrants into the State's workforce:

1. **Expanding Language Access:** Ensure all programs, resources, and training programs are accessible to immigrants who speak any language.
2. **Comprehensive Data Collection:** Conduct demographic analysis to account for the number of immigrants entering Maine to better understand barriers and provide solutions.
3. **Work Authorization Advocacy:** Provide readiness programs to support asylum seekers who are unable to work due to the waiting period. Advocate with the federal government to reduce the waiting period.
4. **Housing Support:** Advocate for affordable housing to support economic stability.

These recommendations carefully consider the myriad of challenges that immigrants face and provide state level solutions. Maine Equal Justice is deeply committed to supporting Maine's growing immigrant population and looks forward to the establishment of the Office of New Americans. Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts with you today. We urge the committee to vote in support of LD 2167.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/notices/Applicant-Caused-Delays-in-Adjudications-of-Asylum-Applications-and-Impact-on-Employment-Authorization.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mecep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/State-of-Working-Maine-2023-Report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>ibid.