

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

James Myall

Good Afternoon, Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government. My name is James Myall, and I'm an Economic Policy Analyst at the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP). I'm here today to testify in support of LD 2167, "An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans" because MECEP believes welcoming immigrants and helping them integrate into our economy both helps their own long-term economic outcomes and strengthens our statewide economy. Indeed, continued welcoming of new residents to our state, both immigrants and Americans from elsewhere, is critical to our economic future.

Much of what I will include in my testimony today is included in my latest *State of Working Maine 2023* report, which was published at the end of last year, and I'd certainly encourage you to read the full report for more details.¹ In the *State of Working Maine 2023*, we examined Maine's tight labor market and identified the inclusion of New Mainers as one way to address this. The creation of an Office of New Mainers would help achieve this goal by supporting new arrivals in meeting their basic needs, learning new skills and making the most of their qualifications, as well as finding jobs and establishing new businesses. I've also attached some stories MECEP collected from New Mainers that accompany the *State of Working Maine 2023*.

MECEP is glad to see that the Governor's proposal for the Office of New Americans will focus on some of the biggest economic barriers for New Mainers.² We also have suggestions for areas that may be worth examining in future.

New Americans tend to be younger, and more educated than existing Americans. They are also more likely to have children and start businesses. In other words, they are often exactly the kind of people who make our state and our economy stronger. On the other hand, they often need assistance making the most of these attributes in their new home, and the Office of New Americans will be positioned to do just that.

The most immediate issue for many asylum seekers is the federal bar on work authorizations. The legislature has already expressed support for a change in federal law, and we are glad to see the ONA would continue to advocate for immigration reform at the federal level.

While waiting for work authorizations, the new ONA can facilitate these individuals in learning English and enrolling in workplace readiness programs. We also need to ensure that new arrivals have a basic level of economic security until they are legally allowed to work to support themselves. Additionally, MECEP would encourage the ONA to look at ways in which the state can provide these supports and not

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leave the responsibility primarily to towns and cities as is currently the case. Immigration provides a statewide benefit and support of these communities should not be a local responsibility.

People who move to Maine need to be able to make the most of their existing credentials and skills. This can be a problem even for people moving from another state, but it's especially acute for immigrants. MECEP has found that Maine residents who are born overseas are more likely to be "underemployed," or working in occupations for which they are over-qualified.³ That's particularly true for immigrants of color. The new ONA could assist on the individual level by helping immigrants transfer their credentials, and at the institutional level by helping align ensure that professional licensing requirements are as flexible as possible.

Finally, as someone who works with data, I want to commend the proposal for the ONA to improve data-gathering on New Mainers. Because the population is relatively small, often economically disadvantaged, and relatively mobile, it can be incredibly difficult to gain reliable information even on the total number of New Americans in the state, let alone demographic or socio-economic information on the population. Better data ultimately makes for better policy making and evaluation.

I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 2167 to support New Mainers and strengthen our economy. Thank you, I'll be happy to take any questions.

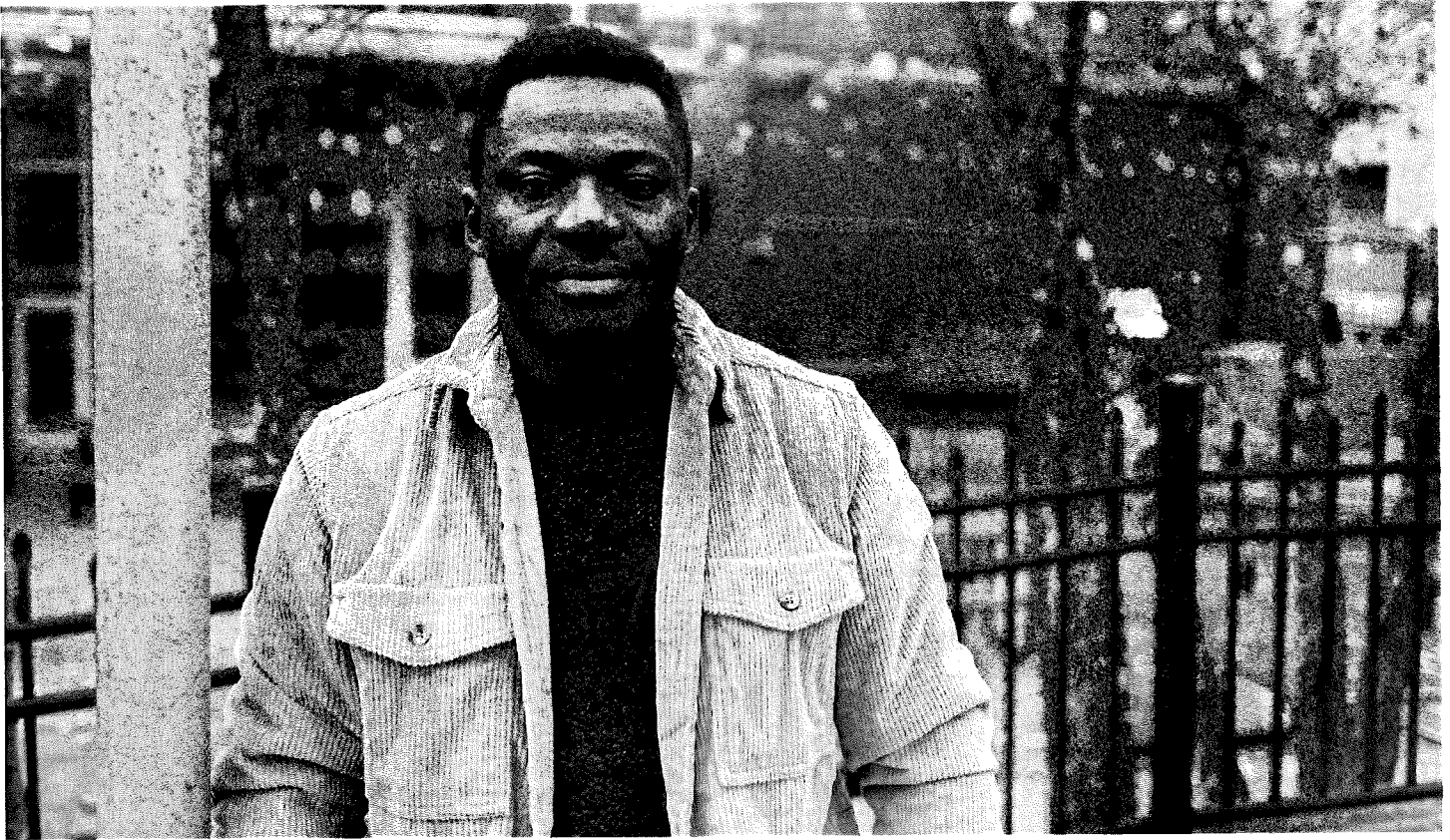
Notes

¹ James Myall, "State of Working Maine 2023." *Maine Center for Economic Policy*. Nov 20, 2023, pp11-15.
<https://www.mecep.org/jobs-and-income/state-of-working-maine-2023/>

² "Plan to Establish the Maine Office of New Americans." *Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future*. n.d.
<https://www.maine.gov/future/ona>. Accessed Jan 30, 2024

³ James Myall, "State of Working Maine 2020." *Maine Center for Economic Policy*. Nov 12, 2020, pp12-13.
<https://www.mecep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/State-of-Working-Maine-2020.pdf>

In the words of workers: Armando



Armando came to Maine in April as an asylum seeker from Angola. He studied finance, banking, and insurance in Angola and is waiting to be able to apply for a work permit. He currently lives in crowded housing in Portland.

"I came to the USA in January and waited in detention for two months before coming to Maine. I have a bachelor's degree in economics and law. I was working in customer service in Angola because I speak a lot of languages: French, Portuguese, and Lingala.

I have a lot of things to do, but I know that life is step by step. I filed my asylum case. The process to get a work permit is the same for everybody. It takes a long time. One hundred-eighty days is too much for all of us. I have waited sixty days already. Lawmakers should change the number of days we have to wait to apply for a work permit. You could do two months. Sixty days would be okay! If I had my work permit now, I could work and pay my taxes and give my contribution in this country. I am living in a place with many members of my community.

I am still looking for housing. It is very, very difficult. People need privacy in their life. Because your privacy is your education. Your mind must be free. I will be happy and free when I get my place. I'm doing a lot of applications for housing. But they don't like General Assistance. I'm praying to God to help me find something. I'm ready! If you told me you have a room for me in Biddeford, oh, I can be happy! I want to meet new people. I want to make American friends.

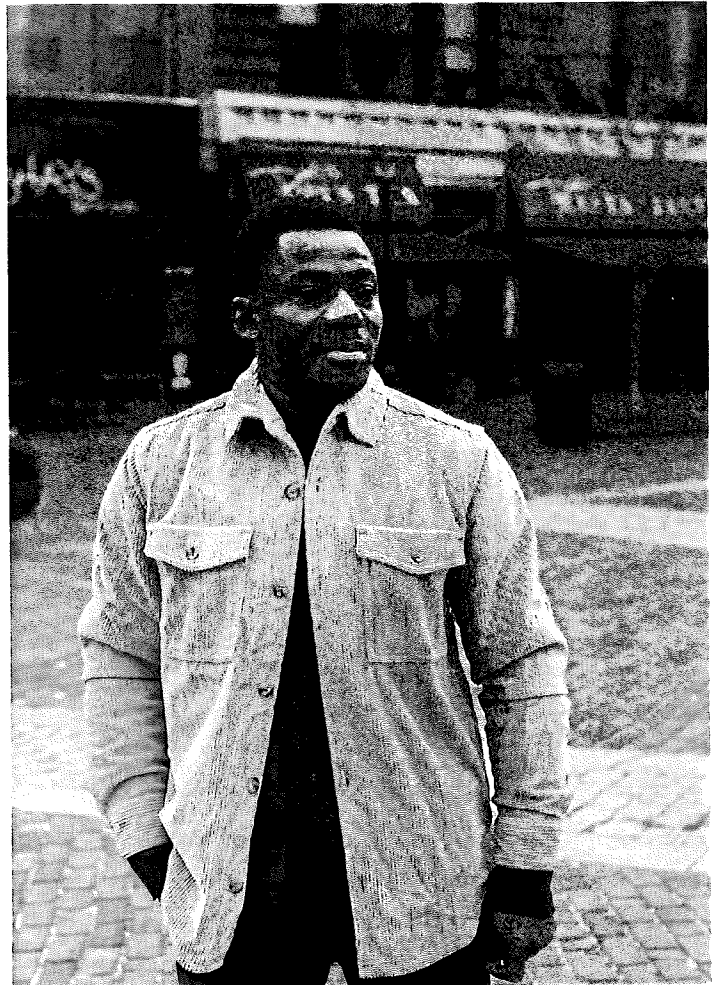
Portland is the key for a lot of us, but Maine has a lot of cities. Maine has Biddeford, Saco, Sanford, Lewiston, Augusta, Presque Isle. People should change their mentality. Everything that's in Portland should be in Saco, in Biddeford.

"I speak French, Portuguese, and today I'm trying to speak English. I could work in a hospital. I'd love to work in a bank. Maine has a lot of immigrants, and I can talk to them. We need more teachers in school who speak our languages. I'm a benefit for you, Maine."

In the words of workers: Armando

Maine is a safe state. We love Maine. We need to give something for this country, for this city, for this state. We speak many languages. I speak French, Portuguese, and today I'm trying to speak English. Maybe tomorrow I'll learn Mandarin! I could work in a hospital. I'd love to work in a bank. Maine has a lot of immigrants, and I can talk to them. We need more teachers in school who speak our languages. We can help facilitate English comprehension for students who don't understand it. I'm a benefit for you, Maine.

We need unity in Maine. White people and Black people must be together because the USA is the freedom country. For me, the USA is like a mother. The mother loves all her children, all her kids. I love the USA and I am ready to give something for this country and for this state."



Armando stands in downtown Portland, looking across Congress Street.

In the words of workers: Marcella



Marcella came to Maine two years ago from Angola and lives with her husband and children in Westbrook. She worked in customer relations at an oil and gas firm back in Angola, and now works as a client coordinator at the Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center, supporting integration for new Mainers. Note: We are using a pseudonym to protect the storyteller's privacy.

"My family and I came to Maine in 2021. We lived in a hotel for nine months. It was such a struggle to get an apartment. If you didn't understand English, you would just give up. We got help from an organization called Greater Portland Family Promise. They helped us get a guarantor and helped us get housing. Once in our home I was able to help other New Mainers. I'd serve as a translator; I'd interpret for them. I still volunteer in churches and nonprofit organizations, making sure that people who are like me, who sound like me, and who are from my country are being taken care of. The way I was received when I first got here, I want to make sure I give back the same way to somebody else who needs it.

When I first arrived, there was help everywhere you turned. The progression between then and now – things have totally changed. Yes, there is still help available, but there aren't as many resources as we had back then. New Mainers have double the dose of challenges now. It's the housing. It's not having childcare. It's not having a work permit. Some people have to live on the street. There is no space in the shelter. It feels like you've been thrown into a fire. And even when you are allowed to work, it takes a toll on you because your benefits are cut off and there are bills piling up. You're not really making enough money to make ends meet. You find yourself back in the same position when you weren't able to provide for yourself.

The biggest problem for me right now is not being able to afford childcare. How do you pay \$380 every week? That's not affordable. I don't even

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In the words of workers: Marcella

think any normal Mainer can afford it. I've got a 7-year-old, my son is turning 6 soon, and I've got an 8-month-old. It's a lot. I'm trying to juggle having a successful career and being a mom.

The work permit situation needs to change. People are tired of being dependent on General Assistance. They want to work. They came from a background where they were workers. They made money. General Assistance is under so much stress because every other person here needs assistance. So how do we help them? We help them by minimizing the time they must wait to work and making sure that all these people who are willing to work are working.

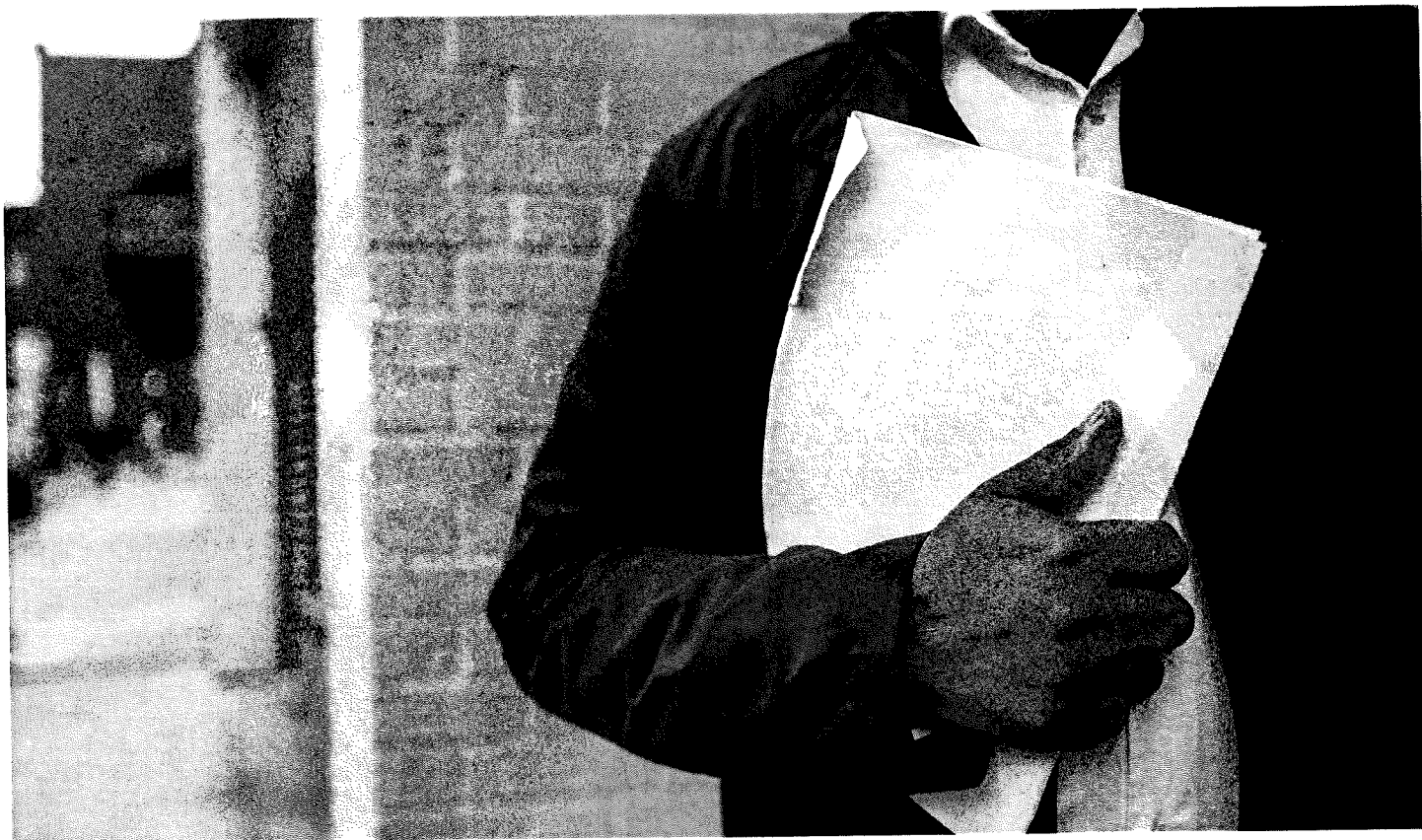
If your English is good, you can work anywhere in Maine. We need to spread out the resources to other cities in Maine, making sure that whatever benefits we are offering here in Portland are being multiplied in other cities. The problem is that some cities don't offer the same benefits that we do here in Portland. That's the biggest hurdle. The second is that people don't know what's out there besides Portland. If we could reach out to the city counselors and mayors and say, "Listen, we have several new Mainers here that we would love to send to you. How can we make the transition easier for them and for you?" They have never given them the opportunity to discover other cities besides Portland. If that opportunity presents itself and there are resources in place to help them integrate, they will go.

The economy in Maine is going to thrive because there's a need for this manpower. We have so many open jobs here in Maine, and we have people to fill them who don't have work permits. Let's find a way to solve that. Let's find a way to say, "You know what? You're here to support yourself. Here's your work permit. Go and make your life." People want a sense that financial stability means freedom. And right now, these people don't have it."



Marcella sits in the lobby at the Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center, a hub of collaboration for New Mainers.

In the words of workers: Silvio



Silvio came to Maine in July as an asylum seeker from Angola. Unable to find housing, he is currently living in a Portland church while waiting to receive his work permit. His field of expertise is business administration. Note: We are using a pseudonym to protect the storyteller's privacy.

"I am currently living in a church. That's the hardest part for me. Housing is the most difficult thing here in Maine. For somebody who is new and has no resources for finding a house, it is really hard. The system for applying for housing is difficult to navigate if you don't understand how it works, and applying is difficult. I've applied on numerous housing sites and portals but there isn't housing available. At the church, it's just a big open space with many other people like me who don't have housing. They feed us there and we have a place to sleep. I would be on the street if I didn't have a place there at the church.

In Angola I went to university and worked for 20 years in logistics and business administration. My area of expertise was import and export. As an asylum seeker, I have to wait at least 180 days to get a work permit, so that's a long process. But I have applied for it. I am taking English classes at the Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center. I'd like to get a job in banking or logistics, but my first goal is improving my language skills, which will be key to getting a better job.

Reducing the time that people have to wait for a work permit is key, because when we're depending on General Assistance we feel like it's more money taken away from the government. What would work better is if they reduced the wait for the work permit to 45 or 60 days. That would help us be more independent. Depending on the government is not such a great thing because in the long run it's more expensive. Reducing the waiting period will help us stabilize and get into the workforce.

In the beginning it was tough. I'm not going to lie; it was hard for me to navigate. But now I'm able to survive. I'm able to manage it because I've found a place to stay in the church, although the most difficult part is not having housing. But if I could put that part aside, Maine is a great place to live."