

Testimony from Tobin Williamson of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition regarding:
LD 2214: An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Monday, February 26, 2024 at 10:00am

Dear Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs & Health and Human Services:

My name is Tobin Williamson and I live in Westbrook. I am speaking today on behalf of the Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, a statewide network of more than 100 organizations working throughout Maine to enhance the lives of the immigrant communities who live here. Today, I want to bring your attention to a few policies for you to consider in your ongoing appropriation deliberations, policies that would potentially have a profound impact on immigrants and non-immigrants alike. There is a lot that we like in this budget, to be sure, but there are also some ways we think it could be even better.

Regrettably, the current language in LD 2214 has **cuts to the Medicare Savings Program** ("MSP") that so many people fought so hard to get last year. Given Maine's demographics, the cuts to eligibility for older Mainers to access this program are especially concerning. Especially with how expensive everything is these days, we know that people of all ages are struggling; however, the impact on older Mainers with limited incomes is especially challenging. We hear stories all the time of people having to choose between rent, food, medication, healthcare access, you name it. The struggles are especially pronounced for older members of the state's immigrant communities, who often face additional challenges like a lack of language access, loneliness / isolation, living with trauma, and so on. One glimmer of hope happened last year when more low-income older Mainers gained access to MSP, which helps pay for Medicare costs, potentially saving them thousands of dollars per year; however, those plans have been removed in this new proposed budget. To quote our friends at the Maine Council on Aging: "The Governor's Supplemental Budget proposes to cut these new eligibility levels, leaving tens of thousands of older Mainers without access to this help."

We were also greatly disappointed to see Part QQ, which "repeals the hardship exception that allows **access to state-funded SNAP benefits** for individuals who have obtained proper work documentation but are unemployed." If there is truly a goal of Ending Hunger in Maine by 2030, this provision would not help reach it. Even if someone has work authorization, high barriers to employment – like language barriers, childcare needs (more on that later), racial or gender discrimination, and/or lack of transportation – may prevent them from working. Others may be enrolled in training or education programs. Regardless, we feel it is a moral imperative that families should not go hungry just because someone is not able to work. And to quote our friends at the Maine Center for Economic Policy: "It has been repeatedly proven¹ that work requirements for SNAP don't lead to more people working, [they] lead to more people who are hungry."

We want to amplify **the need for childcare** faced by so many Mainers and **the importance of the role of childcare workers**. We have often heard of Maine residents who have to choose between going to work or taking care of children, of people who cannot afford daycare, and of childcare providers who are overworked and underpaid. The Legislature made some tremendous strides last year, and we would love to see them implemented as originally planned without delay.

¹ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/expanding-work-requirements-would-make-it-harder-for-people-to-meet>

Finally, we want to re-emphasize **our desire to see the expansion of MaineCare eligibility to all low-income residents regardless of immigration status.** There has been some notable progress in this area in recent years thanks to the ongoing leadership of the “All Means All” coalition and supporters in the Legislature, but it remains a key challenge for many members in the communities we serve. Providing access to healthcare is not just a humanitarian thing to do but in the long term makes financial sense, as people who do not have healthcare coverage often rely on emergency services and/or go without essential medications and preventative care they need. Expanding access to healthcare to people like asylum seekers, temporary workers, and those without documentation may not be included in the current budget proposal, but we believe that it should be.

Moreover, **with the overall fiscal health of the state, we should not be cutting so many people in need out of these life-changing programs.** To quote our friends at the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce: “While we greatly appreciate the care with which the Governor and the Legislature have managed the state’s fiscal matters over the last few years, the fact remains that our rainy-day fund is already at the maximum allowed under state law and these funds could be put toward a number of more pressing priorities.”

We at the Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition hope that you will agree with us about the need to keep the expanded eligibility for the Medicare Savings Program, to prevent hunger by protecting SNAP benefit access, to support the state’s childcare workforce, and to expand MaineCare access so more people can have healthcare if they need it (and we all do at some point). Thank you very much for your consideration of these important policies and recommendations.