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Testimony presenting

LD 471, Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English Language Learner Programs

Senator Joseph Rafferty

Good morning, Chair Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Senator Joe Rafferty. I am pleased to present **LD 471, Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English Language Learner Programs to you.**

Maine is facing one of the most severe worker shortages in the country. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Maine has only 42 available workers for every 100 open jobs.¹ With 41,000 job openings but only 17,148 unemployed workers, our state is struggling to meet the demands of employers across critical sectors including healthcare, education, and skilled trades.

A recent Forbes report highlighted this challenge: "Maine is experiencing a tight labor market, with an older workforce and about two open jobs per unemployed job seeker," explains Joan M. Dolan, director of apprenticeship and strategic partnerships at the Maine Department of Labor. "The influx of workers whose primary language isn't English represents an opportunity to address this shortage—if they can get the language support they need."²

This insight from the Maine Department of Labor underscores precisely what this pilot program aims to address: we have a growing population of new Mainers who possess valuable skills and education but face language barriers that prevent them from fully participating in our economy.

This pilot program represents a strategic investment in addressing the challenges presented above. The program will accelerate language acquisition and prepare participants to fill critical workforce gaps across our state by providing full-time intensive English language instruction.

The economic benefits of this proposal extend far beyond filling job vacancies. Participants will see substantial improvement in their earnings as they gain access to positions that match their skills and education. These higher wages translate directly to increased tax revenue for our state. As participants achieve financial independence, reliance on public assistance programs will decrease, creating additional savings for Maine taxpayers. Furthermore, Maine businesses will gain access to a larger pool of qualified workers, enabling them to grow and expand, strengthening our overall economy.

One of the reasons I was so pleased to sponsor this proposal is the comprehensive approach included in its design. The pilot includes training English teachers our state desperately needs. The pilot includes necessary supports like childcare, transportation, and living stipends that enable participants to focus on learning English full-time so that they can learn as fast as they

can and be the most productive workers they can be when they're back at work. Additionally, it connects graduates with employers through Maine CareerCenters and workforce navigators. The program promises continued meaningful collaboration between Maine's education institutions, employers, and state agencies, creating a holistic ecosystem to support both English language learners and the Maine economy.

But behind the numbers and policy details are real people, businesses and families who will benefit tremendously from this program. Emily Ingwersen, the owner of Ginger Hill Design + Build, a residential construction company based in Arundel, is one such business owner. A builder for over 15 years, Emily has experienced firsthand how finding people to work in the trades is becoming increasingly complex, complicated, and costly. At a time when we face a housing shortage, this is bad news not only for companies like Emily's but also for the future of housing in Maine. This bill will equip the workers who have the skills and desire to enter the construction industry but lack the English proficiency with the language skills they need to get to work building homes for Mainers.

The proposed pilot program will serve up to 780 students over two years—a significant number, but only a fraction of those who could benefit from such services. The data collected during this pilot will be invaluable in shaping future workforce development strategies for our state.

This program represents more than just language instruction; it's an investment in Maine's economic future. It recognizes that our newcomer populations do not have to be simply recipients of services but instead can be valuable contributors to our economy when skilled up.

Finally, this bill has strong support from a broad coalition from small business owners like Emily to community organizations and the construction trades. When folks in the building trades first started talking about workforce gaps in construction, they thought it would be as simple as providing some construction English classes. They've since talked to hundreds of skilled workers who need a lot more English than just a construction English class. And when they realized that the University of Maine system already has a world class intensive English program that can simply be expanded, it was a no brainer.

I ask my fellow committee members to dig in with me. What modifications can we make to strengthen this bill and make it work to fill critical gaps in Maine's workforce and lead to economic growth and stability?

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.