

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and honorable committee members, my name is Oleg Opalnyk. I live in Pownal, and I am here to speak in support of LD 471 to expand intensive English language learner programs in Maine.

I am a business owner of a construction company and multi-family real estate investor.

26 years ago, I arrived in America from Ukraine with extremely limited English skills. This made my world very small and depressing in America. Upon arrival I took intensive English language courses for 8 months to prep me for studying in college. I was able to enroll in the Culinary Institute of Chicago after that, because my English skills were adequate. At graduation I was inducted into the National Honor Society.

When the war began in Ukraine in 2022, my family immediately brought refugees to Maine. In all, we basically adopted 100 war refugees including adults and their children. I say adopt, because when they arrive here, they are all like children in their ability to function in American society. We provided housing and employment. Employing people from Ukraine was easier for me than most companies, because I speak their native language. However, this requires more supervision and personal presence from me. They are unable to communicate with clients, and clerks at supply houses, reading building plans and instructions. I would hire immigrants from other cultures if I could speak their language and do these same things with/for them.

Areas where we assisted their everyday lives include the following. Translation of documents and instructions; enrolling children in the school system; helping non-construction workers find jobs (including interview translation assistance); attending Doctor and Dentist appointments to translate; translation during their driver's license exams; bank account set up and use of checks; registration with DHHS and General Assistance. We believe that it is more helpful to teach a person to fish than to give them a fish. Without English skills, they will never become good fishermen.

When immigrants arrive, it takes a long time before they have work permits. LD 471 will give them English language skills that will enable them to be employed in a good job when their work permit is received. This will mean that they will no longer need government financial assistance to live.

The biggest challenge to become independent is the ability to get a decent job. Without decent English language skills, they are only able to find employment in situations where speech is not highly needed for the work. These jobs do not pay well enough to support a family. In our group of Ukrainian War Refugees are Doctors, Dentists, Nurses, Hospital Administrators, Engineers, IT Specialists and Teachers. None of them can fill these roles here because their English Skills are minimal. They are employed in janitorial services, childcare, and construction work.

Their ability to integrate comfortably into society is highly dependent upon friendships with Americans. When you understand the language, you better understand the way people think and local culture.

Immigrants are intelligent and capable individuals. Often, the biggest barrier between them and their success is simply language. Overcoming this language barrier is key to unlocking their full potential and ability to thrive.

Thank you for letting me be here. I am happy to answer questions.

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