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# Maine Equal Justice

## People Policy Solutions

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### Testimony of Catherine Buxton, Maine Equal Justice In support of LD 471, Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English Language Learner Programs Monday, March 3, 2025

Good morning Chair Rafferty and Chair Murphy, and members of the Education & Cultural Affairs committee,

My name is Catherine Buxton, I am a policy advocate with Maine Equal Justice, a member of the Peer Workforce Navigator Project (PWN). We are a coalition of 6 organizations across the state, including immigrant-led non-profits, ProsperityME & Gateway Community Services. Since 2022, our Navigators have provided culturally-appropriate employment case management to thousands of Mainers, including 1300 immigrants, 86% of whom have limited English proficiency. Lack of access to ELL programs limits our community members' economic independence and success in the workforce.

**The intensive language program expanded by LD 471 is good for individuals *and* good for Maine's economy.** Attracting new talent, including foreign-trained professionals, is key to Maine's 10 Year Economic Development Plan.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, The Department of Labor's 2024 report, "Maine's Changing Labor Market", notes that in-migration of workers is one of the few positive trends that addresses the exit of older workers from the workforce.<sup>2</sup> **Maine needs immigrants.**

New immigrants are often told their work permit is a "golden ticket," but many Peer Workforce Navigator clients find that, with limited English skills, they struggle to cash that ticket in. Few companies are willing to work with multilingual workers, hire interpreters, or offer English classes. There are few openings at companies that make these accommodations, which leaves remaining workers to scrounge for very low-wage jobs, often without benefits.

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<sup>1</sup>March 2024, Maine Department of Economic & Community Development "2020-2029 Maine Economic Development Strategy: 2024 Reset"

<https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov.decd/files/inline-files/Maine%20Economic%20Development%20Strategy%202024%20Reset.pdf>, Accessed March 2025

<sup>2</sup> August 2024, Maine Department of Labor / CWRI, "Maine's Changing Labor Market" Report,  
<https://www.maine.gov/labor/cwri/sites/maine.gov.labor.cwri/files/files/documents/ChangingLaborMarket.pdf>,  
Accessed March 2025

PWN started hosting job seeker clinics in 2023 when Abbott Labs laid off 1000 immigrant workers. Hundreds of people showed up. Many told Navigators they needed to find a job like the one they lost: something that paid well, where they didn't have to speak English. It wasn't that they didn't want to learn; they simply felt the crunch of their bills piling up and couldn't afford to take the time to learn English or train for a better job without help.

We continue to host these clinics. We invite employers too, who say again and again how much they need staff. But there's a disconnect: Most won't consider candidates without Level 3 English; yet so many of our clients – who are enthusiastic and want to work – can't learn English fast enough.

This isn't to discredit the amazing Adult Education programs who have moved mountains to meet the ELL needs of our workforce. But they can't do this alone. Many adult ed classes are only once or twice a week, which means students don't always progress on the timeline they – or Maine's businesses – need to fill in-demand jobs. There isn't a week that goes by that I don't work with someone who was a teacher or a nurse in their home country, who I have to help apply for a job at WalMart or at a fish processor because they don't speak English. Retail or food processing are important industries, but we have a huge need for skilled workers in health care, construction, energy, and more. LD 471 would open up hundreds of spots in the University of Maine's Intensive English programs so Maine won't lose out on these talented workers.

LD 471 is not a blank check: LD 471 ensures students have access to stipends, if they are not otherwise covered by public assistance, to cover known barriers like housing, childcare, and transportation. The Peer Workforce Navigator Project knows this kind of support works: In MDOL's Competitive Skills Scholarship Program, stipends help students meet school expenses and basic needs while they are enrolled in training. Only about 35% of regular community college students complete their degree, compared to 72% of students who have CSSP.<sup>3</sup>

We appreciate that this program will fulfill General Assistance work requirements. Our clients spend hours at Career Centers or nonprofits applying to dozens of jobs a week to comply. They stay on GA, not for lack of effort, but for lack of opportunity. LD 471 will take pressure off social programs by empowering new Mainers with the skills they need to be self-sufficient.

We want people to engage in the workforce not with desperation, but with promise. This bill is not a handout, it's a promise that we *can* meet Maine's workforce needs by investing in people who are so valuable to the economy as workers, but also to our communities as friends, neighbors, and Mainers.

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<sup>3</sup> 2025, Maine Department of Labor's CSSP Annual Report, <https://www.mainecareercenter.gov/docs/2025/cssp/CSSPAnnualReport2024.pdf>, accessed March 2025