Testimony of Hussein Maow
In Support of LD 1956: An Act to Amend the Law Governing the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program and Establish the Community Workforce Connections Program

Good morning Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor.

My name is Hussein Maow. I am a public policy graduate student at the University of Southern Maine, a proud member of Portland's immigrant community, and a long-time volunteer and coordinator with the Peer Workforce Navigator Project. I urge you to support this bill because I've seen firsthand how critical it is to have trusted, community-based support helping Mainers access unemployment benefits and navigate workforce systems that may not reach people equitably.

I became involved in the Peer Workforce Navigator project during the early days of the pandemic, when our communities were facing uncertainty and hardship. I initially started by helping family members who struggled to apply for unemployment benefits. It quickly became clear that too many people were falling through the cracks.

Through a trusted leader, Kate Fahey, I was introduced to a network of community partners dedicated to helping Mainers who face systemic barriers around UI. That led me deeper into this work, and into the heart of a program that believes in meeting people where they are.

One story that has stayed with me is that of a single mother who lost the only job she had held for six years. On top of that, she was navigating the chaos of our changing environment at the height of COVID. She faced numerous barriers to accessing unemployment: she didn't know how to use a computer, had language difficulties and experienced repeated account lockouts caused by security mismatches in the system. She spent countless hours waiting on hold, and when she finally reached an agent, she struggled to explain what was wrong—only that she desperately needed help. What she was receiving from social services just wasn't enough to support her children.

Each week, she was told something new: one time they were waiting on documents from her employer; another time it was identity verification; later they said she had selected the wrong category when she first filed. Weeks passed, and she was still calling—still without access to benefits.

I met this mother after I had already begun helping others and was feeling frustrated myself. But when I sat with her, listened, and looked at her case, I understood what she was facing. Together, we called MDOL, corrected the problem, uploaded her ID, and filed her missed weeks. We made those calls every week until her benefits came through. Without that connection, I truly believe she wouldn't have received the support she needed and deserved.

I recognize that this was a time of crisis unlike anything we had experienced before. MDOL was overwhelmed and many people struggled to get the help that they needed. Since then, I have seen the Department of Labor work hard, and alongside community partners, to make systems more accessible to people with barriers like the single mom I worked with. Even still, real barriers persist for many. That's where Peer Navigators have come in - working together with the Department to solve problems that previously caused too many to fall through the cracks. I've been able to walk alongside people through confusing systems and support them in moments of real crisis. We don't just explain the rules—we restore hope and help build trust in systems that often push people away. And then we work in partnership with the Department to improve those systems.

Through my work, I've also seen how this program has helped improve how state agencies engage with communities. The Peer Navigator project consists of six community organizations that support populations across Maine—especially those who are typically underserved, including immigrants and low-income communities.

Through this partnership, MDOL has gained access to communities they historically struggled to reach. For example, by working with ProsperityME, an immigrant-led organization, state staff have come into trusted spaces to co-support Mainers seeking unemployment assistance. These relationships have allowed government agencies to meet people where they are—both physically and culturally.

Agents I've worked with have shared that they've learned so much from these experiences. They've started to notice what clients *aren't* saying, which often holds the key to unlocking the support they need. This kind of learning can only happen through meaningful partnership—and this program is making that possible.

Peer Navigators matter because systems don't fix themselves—people do. People working together. We are the bridge between state agencies and community members who have been left out for too long. We build trust where there has been confusion, frustration, and fear. Programs like *Community Workforce Connections* don't just make the system more efficient— they make it more human and welcoming.

As a student, as a community member, and as someone who has spent the past few years helping neighbors navigate crisis after crisis, I can say confidently: we need this program. We need ongoing investment in trusted messengers who reflect the communities we serve and who understand, firsthand, the barriers that exist.

I urge you to vote **support LD 1956**. Let's continue building a future where everyone in Maine—not just the well-connected or well-resourced—has a fair shot at recovery, opportunity, and stability.

I'm happy to answer any questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.