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*Testimony of Rep. Deqa Dhalac presenting*

## **LD 1971, An Act to Protect Workers in This State by Clarifying the Relationship of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies with Federal Immigration Authorities**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary*

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, I am Deqa Dhalac, and I represent District 120 which is part of South Portland. I am here today to present **LD 1971, An Act to Protect Workers in This State by Clarifying the Relationship of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies with Federal Immigration Authorities**.

I came to the United States more than 30 years ago, and I have been helping the immigrant community with civic engagement and voter registration since then. I hold two master's degrees: development policy and practice, and social work. I am the first immigrant, Black Muslim woman elected twice for city council in South Portland and in Maine. I was the first Somali-American mayor in the United States. While I am incredibly proud to have opened the door for more folks who look like me, through these experiences, I have continuously endured racial profiling and I have been told repeatedly that immigrants have no place here.

This bill is key to creating a Maine where everyone feels welcomed and included, where we embrace and celebrate diverse cultures, and where we stand for the rights and safety of everyone. This legislation is not just a policy proposal—it reflects our shared values of justice and due process for all, equity and community trust. The way LD 1971 accomplishes this is by clarifying and defining the boundaries between the role of state law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement. Specifically, it ensures that our local and state law enforcement agencies can focus on their primary mission: safeguarding our communities and upholding state laws.

In my years of public service, as a city councilor, mayor and now as a state representative, I have witnessed the fear and uncertainty that can impact immigrant communities when local law enforcement is perceived as—or acts as—an extension of federal immigration authorities.

Currently, local law enforcement is diverting Maine's public safety resources to engage in civil immigration enforcement across our state, which is causing widespread and growing harm. The results include a loss of public trust and a loss of public safety information as people are deterred from reporting crimes, including domestic violence, asking for police assistance, serving as witnesses in criminal cases and more.

Local law enforcement diverting resources toward civil immigration enforcement is also having impacts on our workforce, economy and opportunity for the most prosperous future for all of Maine. Currently, given widespread fear in our state, many of our residents are not going to work, they are not applying for jobs, they are withdrawing candidacy from positions and they are turning down promotions. People are also afraid to invest in themselves and their futures through college, study abroad programs and adult education.

As we all know, Maine holds the distinction of being the oldest state in the United States by median age. As of recent data, the median age in Maine is 45.1 years old, which is significantly higher than the national median age of approximately 38.8 years.

This aging demographic is further highlighted by the fact that nearly 23% of Maine's population is aged 65 or older, surpassing the national average of 16.8%. Notably, Maine is the only state where the number of residents aged 65 and over exceeds those under 18, therefore these demographic trends have significant implications for Maine's economy and workforce.

Many people in our state who have valid work permits, have no criminal record and have applied for lawful immigration protections have been handed over to immigration officials by local law enforcement. Some of these people were literally on their way to work when this happened.

This bill addresses the already serious situation in our state by:

1. Providing definitions of immigration terms.
2. Defining prohibited and permitted activities for law enforcement agencies in their routine activities.
3. Requiring custodial law enforcement agencies to uphold the rights of immigrants detained in those facilities.
4. Prohibiting state employees from asking about immigration status unless required by law or needed to provide a service.

I would like to emphasize that *nothing* in this bill impacts local law enforcement in Maine from being able to do their important work. This is about ensuring that our public safety resources are being spent in ways that promote public safety for everyone. Local law enforcement and government employees engaging in civil immigration enforcement does not do that, and in fact, harms us all. The police chiefs of major cities across the United States recently wrote a letter emphasizing these points. The letter states: "Enforcement of routine civil immigration by police would undermine the trust and cooperation with immigrant communities which are essential elements of community-oriented policing." I have submitted a copy of this letter for the record along with my testimony.

As Maine's lawmakers, it is up to us to set the broad parameters that serve the public good of everyone in our state and our state's future. By clarifying these responsibilities and obligations, this bill accomplishes that and will help to uphold the trust between law enforcement, public servants, and the communities they serve, as well as protect Maine's workforce and economy.

Thank you for your consideration. I urge you to support LD 1971.

I will be more than happy to answer any questions that the committee may have at this time.