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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 1259 and 1971*** Monday, May 19, 2025

Good morning Chairs Carney and Kuhn, and honorable members of the judiciary 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 who together support unemployed and underemployed Mainers in accessing the workforce. Nearly 60 percent of the 2800 people with whom we work are immigrants. I am testifying on behalf of the whole Peer Workforce Navigator Project today in support of both LD 1259 and LD 1971.

The Peer Workforce Navigator Project supports immigrants through our workforce clinics in Lewiston and Portland. But we also work with immigrants across the state, from New Mainers settled in Bangor to farm workers in Milbridge. Our clients are representative of the breadth of communities impacted by both these bills. From Kittery to Fort Kent, LD 1259 and 1971 are about trust, community, and safety for all of us.

Immigrant community members across Maine are “walking on glass” – as reported in a recent Portland Press Herald article on increased ICE activity in Maine¹. There is an increasing concern that even a person following all legal procedures could be targeted, or worse, deported, as has already happened all across the country. We host clinics in community spaces like the library in Bangor, or our offices in downtown Portland and Lewiston. Recently we’ve had to switch from a highly successful, super accessible walk-in model to scheduling appointments – cutting the number of people we serve each week in half – to address community members’ and our own attorneys’ fear about ICE.

More concerningly, we see more of our clients pulling away from public life in response to national headlines, community reports, or messages from federal agencies. We’ve seen people not going to church, pulling their children from school, or skipping medical appointments. At our own clinics, we’ve seen attendance go down. One client, upon receiving what turned out to be an erroneous email from DHS alerting

¹ Womack, Morgan, Terhune, John, Portland Press Herald, “Maine immigrants, undocumented or not, ‘walking on glass’ as enforcement ramps up”
<https://www.pressherald.com/2025/04/03/maine-immigrants-undocumented-or-not-walking-on-glass-as-enforcement-ramps-up/> (April 4, 2025)

her she needed to leave the country in 7 days, immediately went into retreat. She pulled her children from school, she immediately moved out of her house and went to live with a friend. She had just been laid off from her job, so she cancelled her unemployment claim and food stamps, and stopped looking for work. If it hadn't been for the help of a navigator checking on the validity of her work permit, she'd still be hiding today. She lost weight and hair out of stress, and still is afraid to send her children to school.

If the community argument doesn't do it for you – perhaps an economic argument might. Without added assurance or protection, Maine risks losing a workforce our whole state relies on: 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.² **Maine needs immigrants, and it is our duty to continue to build welcoming communities for people who are both already here or will enrich our towns and cities in the future.**

While these two bills cannot fully assuage these fears or prevent unlawful action of federal agents, they offer a layer of protection to help people in our own communities more safely live their daily lives. They ensure our local law enforcement and state agencies are not infringing on the constitutional rights of community members and aiding in the detainment not just of legal, law-abiding people, but of people who are valuable members of their families and their communities.

Why we support LD 1259:

- **We cannot afford these agreements. Local resources should be used to keep our localities safe.** Research has shown that 287(g) agreements with ICE are incredibly costly.³ PWN works with vulnerable people across the state who will be hit hardest strains to local and state budgets if federal cuts to Medicaid, SNAP, Community Block Grants, and so many vital programs actually materialize. We've already seen and felt the impacts of federal cuts – PWN clients are impacted by the their local communities shuttering shelter programs or pausing re-entry and rehabilitation resources. We are worried important law enforcement programs like mental health interventions or domestic violence prevention partnerships will fall to the wayside in order to pay for such arrangements. If this happens, all Mainers lose the safety and stability to which we have a right.

Why we support 1971:

- **This bill protects Maine employees and Maine immigrants.**
- In addition to prohibiting law enforcement agencies from engaging in detention and discrimination based on status, LD 1971 also prohibits state employees and agencies from inquiring about a person's immigration status unless it is vital to determining a public benefit. PWN works hard to build *trust* between local and state government programs, and this provision in LD 1971 is vital to

² 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

³American Immigration Council, The 287(g) program, an overview, [https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/287g-program-immigration#:~:text=What%20problems%20has%20the%20287\(g\)%20program%20caused%3F&text=A%202011%20investigation%20by%20the.including%20racial%20profiling%20of%20Latinos.](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/287g-program-immigration#:~:text=What%20problems%20has%20the%20287(g)%20program%20caused%3F&text=A%202011%20investigation%20by%20the.including%20racial%20profiling%20of%20Latinos.)

continuing this work. Connecting immigrants to public resources – not just public benefits, but workforce and education resources too – is a huge economic boost for Maine.⁴

- We already have deep concerns with how state and individual data could get into the wrong hands and be used to assist immigration enforcement or target community members. Especially in this present administration, we also worry about protected data getting into the hands of not only ICE but also unauthorized federal agents, as we have observed with personal unemployment claims data being given to DOGE, ostensibly for immigration enforcement.⁵ While we cannot prohibit state-federal data sharing, this bill adds a layer of protection in that employees will not be asking and therefore not storing unnecessary immigration data that *could* be forfeited to ICE or CBP. PWN Navigators have been fielding dozens of questions about data privacy and safety concerns from community members who rely on state programs for health care, housing, and food. Should LD 1971 pass, we would feel more comfortable with the advice we can provide immigrant clients who are legally eligible for benefits on their safety.

Immigrant community members make Maine an invariably better place. 1 in 25 workers in Maine are immigrants, and the combined economic output for immigrant workers and business owners is over 3 billion.⁶ But beyond the dollars, for PWN, immigrants are our friends, neighbors, colleagues, bosses, leaders, family, teachers, and children; and like all of us, they deserve to feel safe in their hometowns. Local and state government is a vital line of defense in the aggressive, and frankly unconstitutional, overreach of federal immigration enforcement. **LD 1259 and 1971 are an important part of Maine's response to protecting our communities and building a state that is welcome to all.**

Thank you.

⁴ Myall, James, Maine Center for Economic Policy, <https://www.mecp.org/blog/7-things-to-know-about-immigration-in-maine-and-the-united-states/>, Oct. 29, 2024

⁵ Jamieson, Dave, "DOGE's Pursuit Of Sensitive Unemployment Data Sparks Alarm" March 26, 2025, *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/doge-unemployment-data_n_67e4019be4b077d23da21ff8

⁶ Immigrant Research Initiative, https://immresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/IRI-EPI_One-PageME.pdf (2022)