

128th Legislature

*Senate of
Maine*

Senate District 15

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Senator Langley, Representative Kornfield and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Roger Katz and I represent Augusta and surrounding communities in the State Senate. I am pleased to be here today to present LD 1492, "An Act to Attract, Educate and Retain New Mainers to Strengthen the Workforce."

What is the single biggest challenge facing our state today, both in the short and the long term? I would submit that this is an easy question to answer. It is the demographic tsunami we are facing. I think this reality is sinking into our collective conscience. The warning signs could not be more clear. We are the oldest state in the country and getting older. More people are dying than being born. Our median age has gone up. And up. Our workforce is literally smaller than it was 10 years ago, and as baby boomers begin to exit the workforce, there are fewer younger workers to take their place. A higher percentage of older people are being "supported" by a lower percentage of younger people. This is just not an "interesting" development; it should be unnerving, unsettling, and disturbing. Unless we reverse this trend, there is absolutely no way our state can have a bright economic future. You don't need a PhD. In economics to understand that capital investment simply will not flow to a place with a shrinking and aging workforce. Unless we reverse this trend, there is absolutely no way our state will have a bright economic future. To use a crude analogy, the toilet bowl is beginning to circle and it just won't get better unless we get creative.

How can we reverse the aging phenomenon? To me, there are only three possible ways. First of all, we can start having more kids. That seems unlikely. Secondly, we can do a better job than we are doing keeping our young kids here after they graduate from high school or college. We really need to focus on that, but even keeping every kid here won't be enough. Third, we can do a better job of attracting young people to move to our state. Young people with families who want a better life for themselves and their children. If they have the American

dream we should welcome them with open arms, whether they come from New Hampshire or Ohio or Berundi or Poland or the Philippines.

Just as we are the oldest state in the country, we are also the least diverse ethnically. That is not something to be proud of. The states which are doing better than us understand that. In fact, if you look at the states in our country which gained population over the last 10 years, a significant part of that population growth has been from New Americans. Now "immigration" is a charged word. I'm not talking about illegal immigrants pouring over the border. I am talking about people who are lawfully here who want a better life from their family. Let's look at those people and the impact they have already had on our state. The fact is that Maine's population growth recently has been due entirely to immigrants. Who are they? They have a lower median age and do tend to have higher birth rates. They have higher educational levels, on average, than Mainers. If they are asylums seekers, they tend to have advanced degrees and are professionals. They tend to become entrepreneurs and set up new businesses. And our own children want to live in more diverse communities.

Unless you are Native American, we are all descended from people who came from somewhere else. My four grandparents all came from the Ukraine.

Legal immigration should be a social justice issue. But put that aside for a moment -- I'm here today to talk only about our own economic self interest. The bottom line is that not only do we need to be willing to welcome more a diverse population if we are going to draw young, skilled, educated workers to Maine -- there is an economic imperative that we do so.

And this is not just a Portland or a Lewiston issue. Many rural communities also have workforce shortages. Whether you are a living in Houlton or Calais or Kittery, you hear the same refrain: there are workforce shortages. Healthcare, construction, hospitality -- skilled workers, unskilled workers, --you hear the same it time and time again: "we can't find workers". In rural Maine, it is becoming a

question of survival. Their schools and other key institutions like hospitals are at risk of closing. Becoming a welcoming state to immigrants just has to be a part of the solution.

Communities are already organizing to attract and support immigrants. Recently, my hometown of Augusta had a planning meeting to start a community center. Bangor has proposed a cultural center. Northern Maine Community College is working with Presque Isle to recruit and bring New Mainers. Westbrook, Turner, Augusta are all experiencing more immigrants in the community and the corresponding need for ESOL classes.

We all know that many Mainers are not employed to their full potential, but immigrants face unique barriers. We need specific strategies and supports to integrate them into the workforce. Here are some of the challenges:

Limited English skills

Lack of familiarity with the job application and interview process

Lack of prior US work experience

Difficulties with credential recognition and recertification challenges

Lack of transportation

Difficulty transitioning from temporary to full-time work

While various workforce intermediaries and service providers are addressing some of these barriers, we need to develop a coordinated state– local, public – private initiative to invest in this new workforce.

I am proud to present LD 1492 which begins to address some of those basic barriers to help us integrate immigrants into the workforce and become a welcoming state so that we will be able to attract people of all nationalities who have the American dream.

First and foremost, this bill proposes more resources to help immigrants learn English, with an emphasis on English language classes tailored to specific workplaces and industries. This emphasis is not coincidental. English is a floor for employment. The more English proficiency people have, the higher their earnings and ability to contribute to the local economy.

The bill helps immigrants understand the economic landscape, the needs of employers, and the process for applying and interviewing for jobs. The bill also looks at long term strategies to repopulate rural communities and meet labor needs around the state. It creates a planning processes and coordination of resources.

The bill places responsibility in the Office of Adult Education at the Department of Education to administer competitive grant programs to spread money beyond just the urban areas to communicate with emerging immigrant populations.

The bill looks to public private partnerships with matching funds.

Specifically the bill proposes the following:

Sections 1 establishes a cabinet-level Office of New Mainers as a cabinet-level office to carry out responsibilities of the State relating to immigrants in and immigration into the State. The Office coordinates with other state agencies, local communities, and nonprofit service providers and other private interests , to

develop a strategic plan that establishes goals and strategies to accomplish immigrant integration into the workforce.

Section 2 creates an Advisory Committee of diverse public and private sector stakeholders appointed by the Governor, the Senate president and Speaker of the House to provide input on the plan, as well as metrics, and evaluation of the programs.

Section 3 puts into statute the “Welcome Center Initiative.” The New Mainers Resource Center in Portland has piloted the Center for the past four years with good results. These centers work particularly with higher-skilled immigrants to provide services and training to prepare them to enter Maine’s job market within a period of 6-18 months. State funding leverages other federal and private funding sources. By putting it into statute, other communities can establish similar centers as needed.

Section 4 authorizes the Department of Education to establish a Welcome Center in the City of Lewiston.

Section 5 provides vocation-specific English-language acquisition and workforce training programs administered by the Department of Education’s Adult Education Office. The program must prepare immigrants for identified workforce needs of employers in the State to accelerate their entry into livable wage employment and enhance employer retention of immigrants.

The Office will give special consideration to grant proposals that provide incentives for immigrants to participate in the training, such as agreements with

employers to provide time and space for on-site training or to pay employee's hourly rate to attend the training.

Section 6 tasks the Department of Education to provide grants for English-language acquisition instruction for adult education programs. Programs around the state currently have waiting lists. The Department will allocate funds according to a competitive grant process.

Section 7: The Office of Adult Education will establish a community planning support program that will help communities manage new immigrant populations that have settled in the communities or to attract immigrant populations to address depopulation or workforce shortages in the communities.

The Office will establish by rule the elements of the program including providing English language acquisition, training in vocational skills, identifying employers or areas that would benefit from immigrant residency or employment, and cultivate community support for integrating immigrants into the community. .

This bill is really not the magic bullet. But it is a first step to proactively support immigrants, and increase the scale of institutional support and systems to help address our workforce shortages in population loss.

Let's face it, we and every other state are competing for human capital. New Mainers should be critical part of our statewide development strategy. We need to be smart, we need to be focused, and we need to be welcoming.