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Testimony in Support of LD 2167-An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans

Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
January 30, 2024

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and members of the Committee on State and Local Government,

I am Quincy Hentzel, President and CEO of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce. We represent 1,300 businesses in our region who employ over 75,000 Mainers. We are submitting this written testimony today to express our organization's strongest support for LD 2167. We know that New Mainers want nothing more than to bring their professional and life experiences to bear in Maine's workforce. The proposed Office of New Americans will be well positioned to lend expertise in economic and workforce development and GOPIF's existing capabilities in housing policy to coordinate action on the state level to meet these needs.

We have a tremendous and acute challenge in Maine when it comes to the integration of New Mainers into our economy and communities. Overwhelmed municipalities and charitable organizations have been under immense pressure to accommodate the needs of thousands of New Mainers that have arrived here in the last few years due to the pandemic and failures in federal immigration policy. However, we also have an unimaginable opportunity to stem demographic declines and grow the economic pie for all Mainers. To match that problem with that solution, we need increased support from the state in the form of coordination of service delivery, housing placement, and workforce development among these populations so that they can achieve the economic independence they desire and deserve. We believe that LD 2167 accomplishes many of those goals.

We are encouraged to see language in this legislation that prioritizes improved pathways for professional accreditation and licensure and supports for business to increase the employment, retention, and advancement of immigrant employees. GOPIF conducted countless listening sessions across the state that have informed the legislation, and we were happy to host one at our offices in Portland where we heard from employers a deep desire to engage New Mainers in rewarding careers. Unfortunately, given the strained resources of many of the organizations who assist these individuals, too many barriers remain in place that prevent successful employee/employer matching. From English language deficiencies to senseless licensing barriers, employers are often stymied in their efforts to successfully recruit from immigrant communities.

We thank Governor Mills and her staff in the Governor's Office of Policy, Innovation, and the Future for their tremendous efforts over the last several months to listen to the needs of employers as it relates to coordinating entry for New Mainers in our communities. We also thank this committee for your time and commitment to all Mainers, and we ask for your expeditious approval of this important legislation that will enable New Mainers to use their entrepreneurial and professional skills to contribute to our local economy, build economic security for their families, and inject demographic vitality in our state.