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January 30, 2024

Re: LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the State and Local Government Committee, my name is Vickey Merrill, and I am the Advocacy Director for Community Housing of Maine (CHOM). CHOM is the largest supportive housing provider for homeless populations in Maine. I am a Tri-Chair for the Maine Continuum of Care, Co-Chair of the Maine Homeless Policy Committee, and serve on the Maine Continuum of Care Board of Directors.

I am testifying in strong support of LD 2167, An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans.

This bill establishes the Office of New Americans within the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future and also establishes an advisory council to the Office of New Americans.

In August of 2023, Governor Mills signed an Executive Order directing her Administration to develop a plan to establish an Office of New Americans (ONA) within Maine State government. The Governor's Office of the Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) was tasked with working with stakeholders – including other State agencies, municipalities, schools and colleges, employers, community-based organizations, and the immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking communities – to create a plan for the establishment of the new office to be delivered to the Governor. This bill is the result of that work.

The ONA would focus on building workforce pathways and support for entrepreneurs, strengthening English-language acquisition opportunities, improving coordination of organizations and entities that support immigrants including communities, schools, and employers, engaging in federal immigration policies to benefit Maine, and improving Maine's data about its immigrant populations. As such, this bill would help our state uplift and welcome this willing workforce and fast-track this population into employment sectors desperate for workers. The opportunities presented in LD 2167 would help immigrants and asylum seekers attain gainful employment, which will position them to pay for housing and make a living in Maine.

The overarching goal of the ONA is ensuring that Maine is effectively incorporating immigrants into its workforce and communities, strengthening the economy over the long-term. This goal is wise, as immigrants and people seeking asylum are among those most likely to begin working as soon as they are able (immediately after the mandatory federal waiting period to obtain a work permit for asylum seekers). Demonstrated patterns suggest that this population is likely to need very little assistance after obtaining work status. Immigrants and asylum seekers want to work and contribute to the community which has helped them rebuild their lives.

The ONA would be tasked with “making Maine a home of opportunity for all, by welcoming and supporting immigrants to strengthen Maine's workforce, enhance the vibrancy of Maine's communities, and build a strong and inclusive economy.” To ensure Maine's vitality, we must accomplish this task and continue creating and sustaining a welcoming community that embraces diversity and shows humanity and respect for those who seek a new life here. The creation of the ONA will greatly assist with this endeavor; it is a relatively small investment today that will pay great dividends.



Maine has seen an increase in asylum seekers in its homeless service system, and single adults have filled shelter space leaving no room for traditionally homeless populations. This has led to encampments.

Although Maine desperately needs affordable housing, asylum seekers are not homeless because of that. They are blocked from employment and housing due to federal laws. They have already proven their resiliency and overcome tremendous adversity. Serving them as homeless misses the mark.

It would be wise to have a two-track system, where asylum seekers avoid homelessness and instead have a pathway to self-sufficiency and stability. This bill would greatly assist in that endeavor.

Maine should welcome arriving immigrants and asylum seekers as a wonderful opportunity, and we should help this population establish itself quickly and successfully – outside of the homeless service system. Please pass LD 2167 so that Maine is well poised to do so.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.