

To Chair Nagle, Chair Stover, and the honorable members of the State & Local Government committee,

My name is Sylvie Motoum, and I am testifying in support of LD 2167 to establish an Office of New Americans. I am a proud immigrant who works as a Peer Workforce Navigator with Prosperity Maine. I work directly with immigrants, and I get to see the problems they face every day as they work hard to find jobs and build a new life in our beautiful state.

Just yesterday, I was helping a man, Daniel, who was struggling to navigate the employment system. Daniel came to Maine from the Congo to escape conflict and to access America's quality health care system. He was able to win his battle with cancer last year in Maine because of state assistance and health care services offered to immigrants. But his battle was not only a battle with cancer, he also struggled to understand the many confusing and disconnected social systems. Daniel worked as the director of transportation at an international shipping company back in Congo for 30 years, he has a degree in economics and anthropology. Even though he is older, he wants to continue his career and maybe one day work for the Department of Transportation in Maine. Now that he is healthy, he still has a long way to go. He has to learn the language, get his credentials transferred, and figure out how to find a job that match his skills here in Maine. An Office of New Americans that connects non-profits, government services, health care agencies, businesses, and schools would help strong, smart, and resilient New Mainers like Daniel more efficiently build their life here.

I believe that this bill is important to the progression of not only immigrants but the entire state of Maine. Immigrants are an asset and when given the chance, we positively use our assets to make our community and ourselves better. This bill would ensure that there are more centralized resource for immigrants in the state of Maine, which would help with a lot of troubleshooting and problem solving that often arises as immigrants are trying to navigate their life here. Many highly skilled individuals, like me or like Daniel, come here licensed as doctors, nurses, pilots, engineers, lawyers, professors, construction workers, and business administrators, marketing professionals and more. Many immigrants come with bachelors, masters, and even PhDs but have a difficult time knowing where to apply their knowledge and skills. Maine loses out when we do not help immigrants thrive. We hope that the Office of New Americans can really help people bridge the gap and fully integrate into the workforce.

Additionally, we hope that the state continues to research ways in which the housing crisis can be tackled so that many of those facing homelessness can have access to decent housing and safety. This is one of the most frequent things I see when I am helping people find jobs, they are also struggling to find or pay for their homes. We know that there is a great need for housing in the state of Maine and a portion of the people in need of housing are new immigrants who are coming to the state. We hope that the Office of New Americans can work in collaboration with local and state governments to find a solution for these families.

Thank you for your time, and I ask you to support this bill.