



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

**Testimony in Support
January 30, 2024**

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Melissa Skahan and I serve as the vice president of mission integration at Northern Light Mercy Hospital. I am here today to speak in support of LD 2167: An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans.

As healthcare organizations across Maine seek to respond to increased demand for services and deliver high quality healthcare to the people of Maine, healthcare organizations have workforce shortages. We know that many New Mainers are multilingual with professional backgrounds who are desperate to work. Barriers to employment and advancement are tied to language acquisition and digital literacy. Our education programs in Southern Maine have hundreds on waitlists, and few use a skills-based approach for language learning that ready workers timely.

Two years ago, Mercy Hospital partnered with philanthropy to begin an intensive approach for language acquisition. We offer our employees paid time to attend onsite language acquisition classes, digital literacy classes, and to use a skills-based language learning application called En Gen with a dedicated support coach. We added apprenticeships and partnered to develop bridge programs with adult education. The outcomes are significant as employees embrace these opportunities, improve their language scores, and enroll in licensure or certification programs. For many enrolled, their days are long. They often take classes 5 days per week for 4 hours at adult education, use EnGen for two hours per day, and then work full time on 2nd shift as a housekeeper. After completion, they enroll in certified nursing assistant, medical assistant, or pursue other career pathways to fill critical gaps such as surgical technician or nursing. At Mercy, we no longer have significant vacancy in any entry level roles. We continue to learn how to support the advancement of a multicultural workforce.

We have also learned a lot about the health care needs of New Americans by caring for them in our hospital and outpatient settings. We know that some have chronic diseases that have not been treated for extended periods due to the rigor of their journey to America. Knowing that health can have a direct impact on the success of our workforce, we recommend that health care be added to the activities section and a health care representative to the advisory group outlined in this bill.

A critical role of the Office of New Americans would be to evaluate current language learning services to determine greatest impact and make recommendations for funding that influence outcomes. While New Americans have such potential to help fill workforce gaps across many industries, without advancing best practice and critical learnings from around the country, Maine will struggle to fill vacancies and support job growth.

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