



Immigrant Welcome Center

GREATER PORTLAND

**Testimony In Favor of LD 2167
To
The Joint Committee on State & Local Government**

January 30, 2024

Senator Nagel, Representative Stover, and honorable members of The Joint Committee on State & Local Government:

My name is Belinda Vemba. I am the Advocacy Coordinator with The Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center and I am here today to testify in favor of the passage of LD 2167: An Act to Develop Maine's Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans.

The Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center (The Center) was founded in 2017 and serves as a hub of collaboration that strengthens the immigrant community through language acquisition, economic integration and civic engagement. Today, the Center meets that mission through four (4) main programs:

- The iEnglish program, which oversees a large number of conversation-based, online instruction-based, and out-in-the-community English learning classes.
- Women Lead, an institute focused on empowering women to meet their professional and entrepreneurial goals.
- Community Integration, an adaptive program that focuses on civic education, client referrals, and food security.
- The Business Hub, which helps immigrants understand, navigate, and thrive as a part of the Maine business community.

Each week, over 300 individuals come through our doors to access our services. We serve our clients at every step of their journey. We support English acquisition, a place to hold their Master Calendar hearing, a resume for their first job interview, and grant referrals when a business venture is begun.

As nonprofits, we work hard, head-down to focus on those we serve - we rarely have the capacity to lift our heads up and scan the environment to do meaningful partnerships with other organizations or learn from others doing similar work in other places. The Office of New Americans can provide resources for us to enhance our work, identify and eliminate gaps, and prevent duplication of services.

We are finding that there is great difficulty meeting the immigrant community where they are at. Many immigrants in the United States are not readily equipped with equitable resources to thrive in the community. The Office of New Americans can help in building trust and work with organizations to create a network of support for a historically underserved population. This office can open up connections for the immigrant community to ensure that no one is left behind.

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The importance of the work we do lies in our ability to be on the ground, in the community, and listening to the stories shared by those we serve. It is through the Office of New Americans that our work will be able to be critically advanced and we will gain support on the federal level. Thank you for your time and consideration.