

Testimony of Jake Lachance

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

In support of

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

Sen. Nangle, Rep. Stover, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Jake Lachance, and I am a Government Relations Specialist for the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, which advocates for over 5,000 large and small businesses across the State of Maine. I am here to give testimony in support of LD 2167 “An Act to Develop Maine’s Economy and Strengthen Its Workforce by Establishing an Office of New Americans”.

Since its establishment in 1820, the State of Maine has welcomed New Americans from across the globe. This immigration has been the bedrock of Maine’s economy. Every immigrant population has added a layer to Maine’s economic history, and we are now experiencing yet another chapter of new Americans coming to the State of Maine. Immigrants have contributed to the economic and social foundation of Maine’s workforce, communities, and culture and we should have a system in place to facilitate these populations into our economy and communities.

Currently, Maine is home to more than 56,000 foreign-born individuals, which equates to 1 out of every 25 Mainers. In the metropolitan areas of Greater Portland and Lewiston/Auburn, that number is closer to 1 out of every 10. In recent years, the foreign-born population has increased by more than 50%, which has resulted in more and more of Maine’s children having foreign-born parents.

Maine is the oldest state in the nation (45.1) and over time, these individuals have proven invaluable to the State’s workforce. The reality is, according to the Maine Center for Workforce Research and Information (CWRI), there are roughly two open jobs for each unemployed individual in Maine. The influx of New Americans will be vital to filling these openings so Maine’s economy can continue to thrive. Many Maine Chamber companies have been leading in these efforts. Companies from Barber Foods, Maine Health and Maine’s construction companies have been developing their own best practices to create a welcoming workplace to new Americans, but for many small businesses the idea of incorporating new Americans into their workforce is daunting and today’s legislation can work for all Maine’s businesses and for the new immigrant community.

Specifically, the plan put forth by Governor Mills includes input from more than 800 individuals, encompassing all 16 counties, in over 100 meetings. Similar offices have been established in 18 other states, giving Maine a solid network to help coordinate immigrant integration. This newly designed office will give resources to help strengthen English-language acquisition opportunities, support entrepreneurs, improve coordination of groups that support immigrants such as communities, schools, and employers, and further improve Maine's data about its immigrant populations. Make no mistake, a lot of this work is occurring from disparate offices, but the State of Maine is effectively working to connecting New Americans to Maine businesses, but this new office will bring visibility to these efforts and be a centralized contact for New Americans and Maine businesses alike.

The Maine State Chamber of Commerce has a long history of welcoming and supporting the success of New Americans who come to live and work in Maine, and we applaud the efforts of the Governor and her office in this endeavor. We believe Maine's Office of New Americans will enhance Maine employers' current efforts to integrate New Americans in their workplaces, and help New Americans succeed in Maine. New Americans are critical to growing Maine's competitiveness and improving our State's demographic trajectory, and we urge the members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government to support LD 2167.