



Testimony to the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

in support of

LD 1684, An Act to Strengthen Maine's Workforce by Expanding English Language Acquisition and Workforce Training Programs

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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Distinguished Members of the ECA Committee:

My name is Amy Winston and I am the State Policy Director at Coastal Enterprises, Inc (CEI). I reside in Edgecomb and am testifying today on behalf of CEI in support of LD 1684, "An Act To Strengthen Maine's Workforce by Expanding English Language Acquisition and Workforce Training Programs."

CEI is a 43-year-old Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). We help to grow good jobs, environmentally sustainable enterprises, and shared prosperity in Maine and other rural regions by integrating financing, business and industry expertise, and policy solutions. We envision a world in which communities are economically and environmentally healthy, enabling all people, especially those with low incomes, to reach their full potential. CEI believes that our economy should work for everyone.

CEI works closely with the businesses we finance and advise to address operational, workforce, and environmental challenges. As a "workforce intermediary" we connect CEI-financed businesses with resources available through the broader workforce and education systems, and develop innovative, cross-sector partnerships, such as the Portland Job Alliance, which placed immigrants (and others) in jobs in key industries in Portland that faced acute workforce shortages between 2014 and 2017.

We also provide counseling and training for individuals and families, recognizing that building assets and managing debt, as well as a good job, are key ingredients for family financial security. Our Start Smart program has a strong track record supporting aspiring new Maine entrepreneurs to start and grow businesses, and our small business advisers and natural resource sectors work with both new American and other out-of-state in-migrants.

Maine's demographic challenges, including its natural birth decrease and age structure, are well documented and at odds with future economic growth and prosperity¹. We all know that more Mainers are retiring from than entering the workforce. Employers can't find skilled workers. There is a skill mismatch between the labor force and available jobs. Put together, these population and workforce trends diminish economic activity, making it challenging to recruit and attract, as well as retain and expand businesses to grow the economy. Job market development is critical both to retaining and

¹ LeParulo, Paul. "Attracting New Maine Residents: The Effects of Educational Attainment and Age on Interstate Mobility." Maine Policy Review 28.2(2019):38148. Accessed at UMaine digital commons.



attracting residents. It is well documented that new Mainers are “a critical source of talent, entrepreneurship and labor needed to replace Maine’s retiring workforce.”² While young people might be leaving Maine, immigrants are “ready to put their skills to use and contribute to Maine’s economy.”³ In 2016 CEI released a [report](#) on how Maine can embrace immigrants to strengthen the workforce.⁴ The report argued that Maine needs to elevate the role of immigrants as part of Maine’s economic development strategy to replenish the workforce, diversify our communities, and grow the economy.

These objectives have since been codified in our state’s Economic Recovery Plan, the 10-Year [Economic Development Strategy](#)⁵, and the [Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan](#)⁶, which prioritize workforce talent development and business innovation in key sectors. These dovetailing approaches include both integration of new Mainers into the workforce along with attracting new residents to the state. For the last couple of decades, international immigration and relocation from other states have helped to offset Maine’s natural population decrease. The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in more out-of-state arrivals; and, while this trend is likely to continue, Maine has long been fortunate to welcome new foreign-born talent to the state as well. These newcomers and their children already play a key role in growing Maine’s workforce.

In addition to job market confusion, navigating cultural differences in the employment process, and the inability to have existing credentials recognized and translated, other significant barriers that prevent immigrants and other professionals from working in their occupational fields of study, English proficiency skills are key to immigrants’ success in the workforce.⁷ Although service providers in Maine and additional are addressing these barriers, programs to effect change on any scale require additional resources and a cross-sector commitment to immigrant integration.

This bill makes available resources to adult education programs to increase English language acquisition instruction, including industry-specific English language acquisition and job training for Maine immigrants, to reduce these workforce barriers and address Maine’s fundamental demographic and structural challenges. In conjunction with LD 1329, An Act to Establish the Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative in the Department of Education to Lower Barriers to Career Advancement, LD 1684 would support community efforts in Augusta, Bath/Brunswick, Camden and elsewhere, to welcome immigrants by making available English classes, job training, and resource navigation.

² Dickstein, Carla, Dorner, John, Love, Elizabeth, and Tae Chong. BUILDING MAINE’S ECONOMY: How Maine Can Embrace Immigrants and Strengthen the Workforce. Coastal Enterprises, Inc. With support from the Emanuel and Pauline A. Lerner Foundation and Broad Reach Fund. 2016. 43pp.

³ Barker, Cleo. “Barriers to Employment and Overcoming Economic Integration Challenges for Foreign-Born workers in Maine. 2018. University of Maine. Honors College. 315. Accessed at UMaine digital commons;

⁴ Dickstein, et al. 2016.

⁵ Maine Department of Community and Economic Development. *Maine Economic Development Strategy 2020-2029: A Focus on Talent and Innovation*. Nov. 2019. Accessed at: https://www.maine.gov/decd/sites/maine.gov/decd/files/inline-files/DECD_120919_sm.pdf

⁶ Office of the Governor. The Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan: Investing in Maine’s Families, Businesses, Communities and Future. May 4, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.maine.gov/covid19/sites/maine.gov/covid19/files/inline-files/The%20Maine%20Jobs%20%26%20Recovery%20Plan.pdf>

⁷ McLaughlin, Phoenix. 2020. “Supporting Maine’s Foreign-Trained Professionals.” Prepared for the Maine Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. Kennedy School of Government. Master’s Thesis. 2020.



Some rural Maine communities have already begun to attract and integrate populations into their communities. For example, Downeast Maine has a permanent population of Latinos comprised of formerly seasonal and migrant farmworkers. They have been able to create full-time employment by combining farming with lobster processing at Fair Trade Lobster in Prospect Harbor, which has diversified the local school community and contributed to the local economy.

Small towns can be amenable locations for immigrants when language instruction, job training and other supports are available. A proactive attraction strategy needs to consider key threshold conditions for immigrants: 1) access to year-round employment; 2) access to affordable housing; 3) a welcoming community that helps enculturate immigrants into the local community and educate existing residents about their new neighbors' culture and customs; and 4) a critical mass of immigrants moving together to support each other while still integrating into the larger community.

While there are few businesses in rural Maine large enough to employ substantial numbers of immigrants year-round, there may be opportunities to combine seasonal jobs in different industries to fulfill year-round employment. While care economy work is relatively low paid, there is a severe shortage of care workers in the state, especially in rural areas, and these positions repay workers with rewarding relationships that weave them into local community social networks. Rural communities are appealing to new residents for their qualities of place, including their "slower" pace and strong social networks. Immigrants are an important part of the economic development strategy for both urban and rural Maine. We urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1684.