



United Way
of Southern Maine

LIVE UNITED

Testimony in Support of LD 1050 - Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers

March 21, 2023

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Ninette Irabaruta, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Advocacy at United Way of Southern Maine (UWSM). I am here today on behalf of UWSM to express our support for LD 1050: Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers.

I have a deep personal connection to this matter. My journey to Maine began on January 7, 2012, when I landed in DC and later that day found myself on a Greyhound bus traveling to Portland, Maine. I arrived on the morning of January 8. I arrived in Maine legally having sought asylum. I was only 21 years old and alone. I was afraid of the unknown but also had faith that guided me throughout my journey. No one had told me that I would be arriving in the middle of the winter, with snow everywhere, and the cold that I had never experienced. However, this was minor compared to what I had gone through.

I imagine that not many people in this room have survived genocide, or survived a brutal civil war, or survived multiple political coup d'états, or survived human (or women) rights abuses – I have. I am standing here today because the federal and Maine state governments allowed me not a second or third chance, but a sixth chance to live. I have never taken that for granted.

Many asylum seekers come here for many reasons, and today the humanitarian crisis of asylum seekers is due mostly to social and political events that have caused instability in their home countries.

I would not be here today if I didn't believe in the power of a second chance. Most of the asylees who come here want to work and start providing for themselves and their families right away, while also minimizing the burden that is weighing on local municipalities. This is a win-win for the Maine economy. We know that there is a huge workforce shortage in our state, and we have a unique opportunity to use the needed skills asylum seekers bring into the cities and towns where they settle.

In 2018, the New American Economy released a report that showed the significant role immigrants – asylum seekers included, play in Maine's economy. The report highlighted immigrants in Portland, ME metro area contributed \$1.2 billion to the area's GDP in 2016 and paid \$133 million in federal taxes and \$62 million in state and local taxes.¹ Given their income, immigrants contributed significantly to state and local taxes, including property, sales, and excise taxes levied by state or municipal governments.

Immigrants can grow Maine's economy through tax-based expansion, increased demand for goods, and business creation. Immigrants are more than twice as likely to start a business than their native-born counterparts.²

For these reasons, United Way of Southern Maine (UWSM) supports LD 1050. We understand that there is no such waiver in existence at the federal government; however, it is important that the Maine Legislature send a message to Congress. If somehow the federal government waiver is approved, it would help the asylees to start earning money and provide for themselves and their families. Such support could lead to a financially stable outcome for their lives now and in the future.

We respectfully encourage you to support and pass LD 1050: Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers.

Thank you for your leadership and service.

¹ <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/new-americans-in-portland-maine/>
<https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/maine/>

² [Immigrants: An Important Part of Maine's Economic Development Strategy](#)