Testimony of Susan Roche, Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project
In Support of LD 777 An Act to Establish the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations

May 2, 2019

Thank you Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of LD 777, An Act to Establish the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Populations.

My name is Sue Roche and I am the Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). ILAP is Maine’s only statewide organization that provides immigration legal aid to low income immigrants. ILAP was founded as a *pro bono* project in 1993 and became a staffed organization in 2000. We now have offices in Portland and Lewiston, with 17 staff and over 250 volunteers assisting 3,000 clients each year in their immigration matters. This includes a panel of 180 *pro bono* attorneys who donate approximately 4,000 hours of their time each year, representing over 150 asylum seekers through our *Pro Bono* Asylum Project.

On behalf of ILAP, I would like to express our support for LD 777. It is critical that all Mainers, regardless of race, ethnicity, or country of origin, have the same opportunities for success. Unfortunately, available data shows that significant disparities exist for African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, and other non-white populations in Maine.

At ILAP, we also see the disparities anecdotally through our work with immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. We assist thousands of clients each year from all sixteen counties in Maine, coming from 95-100 different countries. We know that immigrants have a significant impact on Maine’s economy. The American Immigration Council reported that in one year, immigrant owned businesses in Maine brought in $48,000,000 in revenue and that immigrant households strengthened the economy with $953,900,000 in spending power. (See [http://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-maine](http://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-maine)). But many immigrants are not able to reach their full potential. We work with so many clients who have important skills and talents to share and who are eager to work but, like other minority populations, they often struggle to find jobs and they face discrimination and implicit bias which prevents them from reaching their full potential.

We need to better understand these disparities in order to find solutions. We know that causes of disparity are structural, and we must explore structural changes in order to remove these disparities and achieve racial equity. A permanent commission will bring together experts, including representatives from Maine’s racial, indigenous, and ethnic populations, to study and fully understand these problems, and to identify and evaluate potential solutions.
Numerous reports indicate that Maine is an aging state with a significant workforce problem. In order to succeed as a state it is critical that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate in our economy and to reach their full potential. Equity will lead to a better community and economy for everyone. I urge you to support LD777 and to create a Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial and Ethnic Populations.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.