

State of Maine | 131st Legislature
Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government
Testimony of Hannah A. Hudson on behalf of Maine Primary Care Association
January 30, 2024

Supporting:

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

Sponsored by Representative Dhalac

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government, I am Hannah Hudson, Director of Policy at Maine Primary Care Association (MPCA). MPCA is a membership organization representing Maine's Community Health Centers (CHCs), also known as Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Maine's CHCs make up the largest independent primary care network in the state, providing high quality and equitable primary and preventive medical, behavioral, and dental health services for over 200,000 people (1 in 6 Mainers) at more than 80 service delivery sites around the State.

CHCs are at the forefront of delivering care to rural and underserved Maine communities. They provide all patients with comprehensive primary care services, as well as a host of other services that include transportation, translation, and case management services, among others. They are further required to provide this care without regard to a patient's insurance status or ability to pay.

LD 2167 proposes the creation of the Office of New Americans within the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future. This office aims to improve the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State's workforce and communities to strengthen the economy over the long term. We are supportive of LD 2167 and thank Representative Dhalac for bringing this important legislation forward. This will be an important step toward ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives in addressing the unique needs of Maine's vibrant immigrant communities.

MPCA is supportive of the work this office will do to prioritize strengthening workforce opportunities, providing guidance for professional accreditation and licensure, and engaging with businesses to enhance the employment, retention, and advancement of immigrant employees.

Maine's CHCs have long felt the impacts of primary care workforce shortages, especially in rural areas that are experiencing critical challenges with access to care. Some commonly identified issues specific to our CHCs are increased retirements due to an aging workforce; difficulty hiring, recruiting, and retaining clinical and support staff (such as MAs and Community Health Workers); a dire need for more primary care physicians, RNs, and behavioral health clinicians (such as LCSWs); wage inflation and competition; and a lack of high-quality training that prepares clinical support staff for employment at a CHC.

The establishment of the Office of New Americans indicates a commitment to inclusive community building that aligns with the foundation of the Community Health Center movement. The official establishment of CHCs arose from the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when the Office of Economic Opportunity established "neighborhood health centers" as a War on Poverty demonstration program.

The aim of these clinics was to provide access points to health and social services for medically underserved and disenfranchised populations, and to serve as a mechanism for community empowerment. Health center staff came from the community, acknowledging the importance of local knowledge they brought to the work.

Today, CHCs continue this mission and remain focused on ensuring access and equity in the health care setting and beyond. We look forward to supporting the Office of New Americans and will continue to work toward a Maine where communities actively engage with and support immigrants, fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment.

On behalf of Maine's Community Health Centers, thank you for considering our comments. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly at hudson@mepca.org with any follow up questions.

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