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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of LD 1684. My name is Jane Makela and I live in Falmouth. I submit this testimony on behalf of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, reflecting our fundamental commitment as people of faith to the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

Few things better establish and reinforce that worth and dignity than a person's ability to become a productive, contributing member of society, use one's skills and be able to meet one's own needs and those of one's family. This bill makes that possible.

There is no question that our state needs these new Mainers and their significant contributions to our economy: You will no doubt hear statistics from people with those specific facts and figures. What I know is that those who arrive here, almost without exception, are desperate to become productively employed and get out of the line at local public assistance offices, where human worth and dignity certainly don't have their best showing.

I am a retired lawyer now providing pro bono legal services to asylum seekers, including helping them apply for work authorization. Every one of them is ticking off the 365 days until they can submit that magic work permit application, get off public assistance and look for work.

But in my experience, too many of them end up grossly underemployed in minimum wage jobs with no advancement possibilities as a result of insufficient English proficiency or unfamiliarity with how the American workplace operates. And once they are working what will probably be multiple minimum wage jobs just to cover rent and food, there is rarely any time left to attend classes to acquire or upgrade job skills or seek professional certifications. It is a loss for them and for the employers of this state who need skilled employees to fill better-paying jobs.

This bill meets not just the needs of new Mainers, but also those of employers—including Maine's many small employers, who can participate collectively in the bill's industry-specific skills training programs. Funding goes to the places in the state where it is most needed, immigrants can be working on English and skills training during the otherwise unproductive work permit waiting period, and skills training matches the precise needs of employers with jobs ready to be filled.

That's a win-win result for all of us here in Maine.