

Testimony Before the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
On LD 1317 “An Act to Restore Services to Help Certain Noncitizens Meet Their Basic
Needs”

April 12, 2019

Senator Gratwick, Representative Hymanson and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 1317.

My name is Jane Makela and I live in Falmouth. I am here today on behalf of the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network, as a person of faith committed to our fundamental principle of justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

I am a retired lawyer but now volunteer my legal services on a pro bono basis to refugees, asylum seekers and other immigrants struggling to get a foothold in this country. I was drawn to this work through my religious denomination and its emphasis on immigration as a moral issue.

The immigrants I’ve worked with over the last decade are predominantly from Africa and mostly asylum seekers. Asylum seekers have been hit particularly hard by the denial of benefits this bill would restore because of the complexity of the asylum process itself.

To prepare an asylum application that will meet the rigorous tests for proving asylum eligibility can require months of work: obtaining documents from home countries where that is difficult and often dangerous, finding someone to translate those documents, completing the 9-page asylum application form itself and writing the detailed account of one’s personal experience that generally accompanies the asylum application form. Finding a lawyer takes time, if you can find one at all: There are never enough pro bono lawyers and asylum seekers cannot work to earn money to pay a lawyer until at least 6 months *after* their asylum application has been filed.

In the meantime, while working on their asylum applications with whatever help they can find in the community, they wait to get into English classes at adult education programs and, without a vehicle or money for the bus, walking miles and miles from one food pantry to another, one clothing give-away to another, piecing together a hodgepodge of donated items to try to meet basic needs.

No one wants to depend on charity OR on public assistance. It has been my experience, without exception, that asylum seekers want to work as soon as they can. And they will work at whatever jobs they can get—often those that no one else will do. I recently

bumped into a friend with a pending asylum application on the street in downtown Portland. I happen to know that in his home country he was a high-level government minister and, before that, a member of Parliament. He told me is now working two jobs as a janitor.

But one or even two minimum wage jobs will not both pay the rent and provide food, medical care and other basic needs for a family. Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you need some extra help.

And making someone wait 5 years or 6 months or any other period before they can get that extra help is just wrong—wrong in multiple ways. First, it sends a we-don't-want-or-need-you message to immigrants, who economists and experts agree are vital to the economy of Maine as more and more jobs go unfilled around the state.

LD 1317 sends the message that we not only *welcome* the immigrants through whom our workforce can replenish itself and our economy can grow, but that we are willing to enable them to live with a measure of dignity, assisting them to meet their families' basic needs until those needs can be met unaided. That is the compassionate and the moral thing to do in a just society.

In almost all of our faith traditions, we are directed to welcome the stranger. Following that direction entails more than simply opening the door: we are asked to treat the stranger's injuries, provide him a warm place to sleep and set him a place at the table. LD 1317 is an opportunity to do so.

Thank you.