

# Maine Office of New Americans

## Report to the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development



January 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

The Maine Office of New Americans (ONA) was established in statute on Aug. 8, 2024, “for the purpose of improving the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State’s workforce and communities to strengthen the economy over the long term.”<sup>1</sup> The Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future (GOPIF) launched the ONA in January 2025 following an extensive stakeholder engagement process, with a charge of making Maine a home of opportunity for all, strengthening Maine's workforce, enhancing the vibrancy of Maine's communities, and building a strong economy.

This first biennial report to the Legislature provides an overview of the ONA in its first year of operations, including its establishment and building of organizational capacity and resources to advance this charge. The report summarizes the work of the ONA Advisory Council, whose expertise and perspectives help guide the ONA’s priorities. Finally, it offers a landscape analysis of what has changed in the last year, and recommendations for the ONA’s work moving forward.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE MAINE OFFICE OF NEW AMERICANS

On Jan. 19, 2024, joined by business owners, immigrant community leaders, municipal leaders, lawmakers, and others, Governor Janet Mills unveiled a plan to establish an Office of New Americans within Maine state government.

Maine faces a shortage of workers across regions, professions, and skill levels, especially in critical sectors such as health care, education, and construction. Improving how Maine introduces and integrates New Americans into its communities and economy is one key strategy to addressing the state’s workforce needs, as attracting and retaining new workers is a priority for Maine’s economic future. According to a recent report from the Migration Policy Institute, more immigrants in Maine are of prime working age as compared to the rest of the population, with 45 percent of foreign-born Mainers aged 25 to 54 years old, compared to 36 percent of U.S.-born Mainers<sup>2</sup>.

The [Plan to Establish an Office of New Americans](#) recommended that ONA be charged with “making Maine a home of opportunity for all, by welcoming and supporting immigrants to strengthen Maine’s workforce, enhance the vibrancy of Maine’s communities, and build a strong and inclusive economy.” The plan also proposed that ONA focus on strengthening English-language acquisition opportunities; building workforce pathways and support for entrepreneurs; improving coordination of organizations and entities that support immigrants, including communities, schools, and employers; tracking and engaging in federal immigration policies that would benefit Maine; and improving Maine’s data about its immigrant populations.

These priorities reflected input from a diverse array of stakeholders. With Executive Order 2 of Fiscal Year 2023/2024, Governor Mills directed the Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation and the Future to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/statutes/5/title5sec3110.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Maine’s Immigrant Communities: Diverse Origins, Characteristics, and Challenges.” Migration Policy Institute, October 2025. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/maine-immigrant-communities>

deliver a plan for establishing an Office of New Americans. Throughout the fall of 2023, the GOPIF undertook an extensive stakeholder outreach effort, which included over 100 meetings with more than 800 individuals from every county in Maine representing municipalities, schools and colleges, employers, chambers of commerce, community-based organizations, and immigrant communities. Early supporters of a Maine ONA included the Maine State Chamber of Commerce and several local and regional Chambers of Commerce, business associations, community-based organizations, municipalities, the Maine Community College System, the University of Maine System, and Catholic Charities Maine, Maine’s replacement designee for refugee resettlement.

The Executive Order also directed the GOPIF to participate in the Office of New Americans State Network, a forum for state policy leaders to drive positive change that supports immigrant and refugee integration into the workforce and economy.”<sup>3</sup> Maine was the 19th state to join the network, co-convened by World Education services and the American Immigration Council.

Legislation introduced on behalf of the Governor created the Office of New Americans, consistent with the plan. The text of the bill, LD 2167, was included in the state budget bill and enacted on Aug. 8, 2024. The Legislature funded the ONA for two staff members and associated administrative costs.

## **PROGRESS TO DATE**

### **Establishing the Office of New Americans**

Maine’s ONA launched in January 2025 with a Director and Policy Analyst and a new online presence. Its website at [maine.gov/future/ONA](https://www.maine.gov/future/ONA) is translated into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Lingala, and Somali to ensure that individuals with limited English proficiency are able to access the site and its resources, which include an inventory of organizations across Maine that support immigrants and communities seeking to welcome them.

### **Advisory Council**

The Office of New Americans Advisory Council was established in statute to advise the ONA “on matters affecting the long-term economic and civic integration of immigrants in the State.” Consisting of 24 members appointed by the Governor, Speaker of the House, and Senate President, the council includes individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, including leaders from immigrant communities, a legal assistance provider, a refugee resettlement organization, educational institutions, and local government.

The ONA Advisory Council meets quarterly. The first meeting was held on Monday, April 14, 2025, with a total of four meetings held to date. Topics have included priorities as outlined in the 2024 Plan

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<sup>3</sup> Executive Order 2: An Order to Strengthen Maine’s Economy and Communities by Developing an Office of new Americans. [https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/official\\_documents/executive-orders/2024-01-executive-order-2-order-strengthen-maines-economy-and](https://www.maine.gov/governor/mills/official_documents/executive-orders/2024-01-executive-order-2-order-strengthen-maines-economy-and)

to Establish the Maine Office of New Americans, such as challenges and opportunities in English Language Acquisition.

## **Projects and Priorities**

The Office of New Americans was established for the purpose of improving the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State’s workforce and communities to strengthen the economy over the long term. Its activities, outlined in statute, include strengthening workforce pathways; expanding, improving and increasing access to English language learning programs; and strengthening financial literacy programs and entrepreneurship supports. In its first year of operations, ONA consulted with the Advisory Council, Mills Administration leadership, and others to outline a set of priorities to begin to address the statutory directives.

### **Strengthening English language learning in Maine**

ONA is charged with “Expanding, improving and increasing access to English language learning programs.” The State’s 2024 Plan to Establish the ONA recognized that English language skills can be a key tool for navigating many elements of economic and civic integration, and that occupationally relevant vocabulary and soft language skills translate into job readiness for many. Ongoing community engagement this year, including consultations with the ONA Advisory Council, have emphasized that the current system does not provide sufficient access for all learners who could benefit from improved English skills. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that roughly 12,400 immigrants in Maine are Limited English Proficient (LEP), meaning they self-report speaking English less than “very well.”<sup>4</sup>

Much of the ONA’s initial work has focused on strengthening Maine’s ELA infrastructure and includes:

- Commissioning an assessment of English language acquisition programs in the state, with a particular focus on documenting the current ecosystem of ELA providers, establishing the number of enrolled learners, uncovering geographic disparities, and estimating waitlists for English instruction due to limited capacity or a lack of local resources.
- Collaborating with Maine’s Chamber of Commerce to offer employers access to EnGen, a virtual English upskilling platform that provides on-demand English instruction tailored to the needs of specific sectors. The program launched in August and quickly met its 150-learner target and ONA is exploring ways to offer the opportunity to more learners.
- Collecting perspectives from and with the ONA Advisory Council on the landscape of English Language Acquisition in Maine and opportunities to improve. Advisory Council meetings have featured presentations from the State Adult Education Director, University of Southern Maine researchers, Adult Education directors serving three highly distinct communities (Westbrook, Waterville, and RSU 24 in Sullivan), and a panel of employers who offer English classes to their workforce.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/maine-immigrant-communities>

## **Workforce Pathways for Internationally Trained Professionals**

ONA's authorizing statute directs the Office to engage in activities to strengthen "workforce opportunities by providing guidance and promoting improved pathways for professional accreditation and licensure." For immigrants with foreign credentials and professional experience, the pathway back into their preferred field can be lengthy and arduous. As noted in the ONA plan, those individuals "often choose not to pursue professional licensure in their prior field, opting instead for other fields with fewer barriers." Professional licensing is highly technical, complex and occupation-specific, with 70 licensed professions and occupations overseen by or affiliated with the Maine Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation (OPOR) alone.

To better identify where policy changes might be implemented to strengthen career pathways for internationally trained professionals, ONA has focused on understanding the process of re-licensure by:

- Partnering with the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development and World Education Services on a report detailing the steps to credential attainment in seven in-demand careers: nurses, electricians, plumbers, teachers, accountants, social workers, and engineers.
- Consulting with employers in technical fields on how they address re-credentialing.

## **Streamlining access to civic and economic resources for New Americans**

A core administrative function of the ONA is to coordinate and disseminate technical and other resources for municipalities, school administrative units, and employers who are welcoming New Americans, along with improved coordination of organizations and entities engaged in supporting immigrants. Maine is home to dozens of organizations that support the resettlement and integration of New Americans, and a robust ecosystem of community organizations, government entities, and other resources that offer newcomers assistance with basic needs, workforce development and training, and other community functions. Even with the existing network, it can be challenging for newcomers and employers who wish to hire them to navigate to identify and connect with relevant resources.

To begin to address the navigation challenges, ONA's website provides a list of 60 organizations that offer resources for New Americans. It includes:

- Organizations exclusively dedicated to advancing immigrant inclusion and integration.
- Organizations with broader missions that offer specific programs for immigrants.
- Organizations that support Mainers, including immigrants, access opportunities to participate in the workforce.

The list identifies each organization's primary focus area and the counties served, allowing immigrants and community navigators to quickly identify available and relevant resources.

The ONA website also offers a full inventory of entities providing English Language services, a list that includes higher education institutions, community-based organizations, literacy volunteers, and adult education providers.

## **Community Engagement and Federal Policy Changes**

ONA is directed in statute to work with municipalities, school administrative units, educational institutions, community-based organizations and businesses providing assistance or opportunities to immigrants. Over the course of the office's first year, ONA dedicated significant resources to ongoing community engagement, meeting with leaders from each of the constituencies identified in statute and others. Staff members have attended community events, participated in meetings and convenings, presented on the office and its focus, and gathered input and ideas to shape the office's ongoing strategy and priorities.

The Maine ONA continues to participate in the nationwide Office of New Americans State Network, which now includes 23 states, garnering and sharing best practices and information. The Network has also served as a valuable resource in monitoring federal policy changes that may impact Maine's immigrant population.

In addition to working with researchers on specific reports, ONA staff analyzes publicly available data to inform policy decisions related to Maine's immigrant populations. This work has become more important in light of federal policy changes that apply to specific nationalities and immigration statuses.

## **SHIFTING LANDSCAPES**

### **2025 Updates**

Several regional and national trends and policy changes have shaped ONA's approach to the office's work moving forward. While exact state-specific numbers are not yet available, the United States has seen an overall steep decline in the new arrival of immigrants over the last year and a half, beginning with restrictions on asylum applications in 2024 and carrying through myriad executive actions in 2025. For the first time since the 1960s, the U.S.'s foreign-born population has shrunk.<sup>5</sup> This overall trend is reflected in Maine, where community-based organizations report smaller numbers of recent arrivals, with some newcomers coming into the state through secondary migration from other regions of the U.S.

Asylum seekers and recipients of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) face new challenges related to their ability to retain work authorization: TPS has been rescinded for several countries, and asylum seekers face new restrictions, including a shortened period of work authorization for new applications (5 years to 18 months) and new fees for work permits without the possibility of fee waivers.

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<sup>5</sup> Pew Research: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/21/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/>

Looking ahead, adult education, the largest provider of English Language classes for adults in Maine, is facing the risk of steep federal budget cuts, with a \$729 million cut in the FY 2026 budget proposed by the Trump administration.<sup>6</sup> Federal funds represent roughly 25% of the overall budget for adult education in Maine, with the remainder provided by state general funds and local contribution.

## **Consistent Challenges and Opportunities**

Through its first year of operations, ONA has consistently heard from community members, employers, and English language providers about the ongoing need to assist adult learners looking to learn and improve their English proficiency, which enables entry into higher paying sectors and jobs. Challenges include limited access to classes in rural areas and lengthy waitlist in southern Maine. Employers report wanting to support their employees learning English, citing the clear benefits to employee engagement and retention, but not knowing where to start, especially for smaller businesses.

Businesses in key sectors, such as construction, health care, manufacturing, hospitality, and agriculture, continue to report difficulties filling jobs, and are looking to skilled immigrants to meet their workforce needs. Employers who have successfully leveraged immigrant talent report long-term benefits, including improved retention of all employees, not only immigrants. New Americans work in virtually every sector in the state, meeting businesses' hiring needs while contributing to the economic vitality of their communities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In its first year of operations, the Maine Office of New Americans has demonstrated the ongoing need for a state office dedicated to improving the long-term civic and economic integration of immigrants. While many of Maine's immigrant communities have faced uncertainty in the last year due to federal policy changes, the core mission of ONA to support long-term immigrant success continues to resonate. ONA should continue to prioritize its founding principles that continue to be relevant today, including expanding and improving English language classes, supporting aspiring small business owners and entrepreneurs, and improving workforce pathways.

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<sup>6</sup> Whitehouse Budget release, p. 6: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Fiscal-Year-2026-Discretionary-Budget-Request.pdf>

## APPENDIX

### Maine Office of New Americans Authorizing Statute

Title 5: ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES AND SERVICES

Part 8: POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

Chapter 310: OFFICE OF POLICY INNOVATION AND THE FUTURE

3110. Office of New Americans

**1. Establishment; purpose; administration.** The Office of New Americans is established within the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future for the purpose of improving the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State's workforce and communities to strengthen the economy over the long term. The Office of Policy Innovation and the Future shall administer the Office of New Americans.

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

**2. Director; duties.** The director of the Office of New Americans shall fulfill the duties and activities listed in this section:

A. Hiring professional personnel competent by education, training and experience to carry out the work of the Office of New Americans; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

B. Supervising and administering the affairs of the Office of New Americans; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

C. Determining the necessary budget for the Office of New Americans; and [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

D. Reporting on the activities of the Office of New Americans. [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

**3. Duties of the Office of New Americans.** Under the supervision of the director of the Office of Policy Innovation and the Future and the director of the Office of New Americans, and with guidance from the Office of New Americans Advisory Council established in [section 3111](#), the Office of New Americans shall identify and address needs, barriers and opportunities in order to support the long-term economic and civic integration of immigrants in the State by:

A. Collecting and analyzing relevant data; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

B. Coordinating with all relevant local, state and federal government agencies; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

C. Serving as the State's primary liaison with all relevant external stakeholders; and [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

D. Undertaking and promoting activities that improve the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State's workforce and communities. [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

**4. Activities.** The Office of New Americans shall undertake and promote activities that improve the economic and civic integration of immigrants into the State's workforce and communities. Activities may include, but are not limited to:

A. Strengthening workforce opportunities by providing guidance and promoting improved pathways for professional accreditation and licensure, supporting enhanced career pathways and engaging with businesses to increase employment, retention and advancement of immigrant employees; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

B. Expanding, improving and increasing access to English language learning programs; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

C. Strengthening financial literacy programs, financial education and entrepreneurship supports to assist individuals, immigrant entrepreneurs and small business owners; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

D. Supporting the expansion of access to legal services and protections; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

E. Partnering with and supporting municipalities, school administrative units, educational institutions, community-based organizations and businesses providing assistance or opportunities to immigrants; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

F. Participating in the nationwide Office of New Americans State Network, or its successor network, to access information and best practices from other states; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

G. Collaborating with and providing guidance to agencies of State Government and the entity designated by the Federal Government to administer the State's refugee resettlement services in developing and executing policies that support the purpose of the Office of New Americans; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

H. Coordinating with and advising federal agencies and the State's congressional delegation on federal policies that support the purpose of the Office of New Americans; [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

I. Advising the Governor and Legislature regarding any statutory, regulatory or other policies or practices that may be addressed to better support the purpose of the Office of New Americans; and [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

J. Promoting greater understanding of the history of immigration in the State, the contributions and influence of immigrants in the State and how communities may support immigrants' integration into local civic and economic life. [PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

**5. Rulemaking.** The Office of New Americans may adopt rules as necessary for the proper administration of this section and [section 3111](#) pursuant to the Maine Administrative Procedure Act. Unless otherwise specified, rules adopted pursuant to this subsection are routine technical rules as defined in [chapter 375, subchapter 2-A](#).

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

**6. Report.** Beginning February 1, 2026, the Office of New Americans shall report biennially to the Governor and to the joint standing committee of the Legislature having jurisdiction over relevant matters with information and recommendations relating to the work and needs of the Office of New Americans.

[PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).]

#### SECTION HISTORY

PL 2023, c. 643, Pt. FF, §1 (NEW).

## **Advisory Council Members**

### Governor's Appointments

- **Julia Trujillo Luengo, Co-chair**, Maine Community College System
- Claude Rwaganje, Prosperity Maine
- Marwa Hassanién, Northern Light Health and Bangor School Board
- Nawar Alobaidi, Engineers Auto Service
- Rotha Chan, TD Bank
- Juana Rodriguez-Vazquez, Mano en Mano/Hand in Hand
- Olesya Shkut, Bluetriton/Poland Spring
- Kerem Durdag, GWI
- Orlina Boteva, University of Maine
- Jonathan Baty, MaineHealth
- Ben Conniff, Luke's Lobster

### Senate President's Appointments

- **Georges Budagu Makoko, Co-chair**, Amjambo Africa and Serenity Residential Care
- Mufalo Chitam, Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition
- Heremenegildo Paulo, South Portland School Department
- Barbara Stoddard, New Mainer Resource Center/Portland Adult Education
- Rick Bennett, Senate District 18
- Margaret Rotundo, Senate District 21

### House Speaker's Appointments

- Fatuma Hussein, Immigrant Resource Center of Maine
- Liam LaFountain, City of Biddeford
- Lisa Parisio, ILAP Maine
- Inza Ouattara, Catholic Charities
- Flavia DeBrito, House District 64
- Amy Arata, House District 104