

Testimony for the Labor and Housing Committee

March 21, 2023

Regarding LD 1050: **Resolve, Directing the Department of Labor to Request a Federal Waiver to Allow Presumptive Work Eligibility for Asylum Seekers:**



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Good afternoon, Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and distinguished members of the Labor and Housing Committee. Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Kristen Farnham. I am Vice President of Legal Affairs and Advancement at Spurwink. I am here to speak in support of LD 1050. At Spurwink, we provide behavioral health and educational services to children, adults, and families across Maine. Last year, we served over 8,100 Maine people affected by trauma, mental health challenges, substance use disorders, developmental disabilities and autism, so they can lead healthy, engaged lives in their communities.

There are three things that are among the most cited factors for what makes life meaningful, according to a 2021 study by the Pew Research Center. First is family: seeing our family flourish and spending time with family. The second is work: supporting oneself and one's family and being a productive part of the community and economy. The third is material well-being: having your basic needs met and having enough to support one's family. These three elements are obviously intertwined and each impacts the others.

LD 1050 supports asylum seekers in their ability and desire to work and therefore in their pursuit of a meaningful life. Spurwink wholeheartedly supports the policy shift that would enable recent immigrants to work in the 6 months while their asylum applications are processed.

There are two perspectives from which Spurwink supports LD 1050: client need and workforce development.

First, LD 1050 creates opportunity for the vulnerable populations that we serve. Across our programs, we serve the behavioral health needs of recent immigrants. In particular, this population is served by our ShifaME refugee program, which works with adults, children and cultural brokers to provide trauma therapy. We are serving approximately 200 children and their families, primarily in Lewiston, Saco/Biddeford, Portland, Westbrook and expanding to Brunswick. We serve mostly Congolese, Rwandan, Somali, Afghan and Iraqi refugees.

Second, LD 1050 helps to address the behavioral health workforce crisis. The hiring of workers is a key challenge at Spurwink, as it is across the state. We currently have about 100 open positions. Currently, about one-third of our workforce is comprised of recent immigrants, and it is a workforce that is highly valued at Spurwink. This bill would open a larger potential applicant pool and potentially offer some relief to the workforce challenge.

Thank you for considering LD 1050 and for working collaboratively with the federal government to widen the path to a productive and meaningful life for asylum seekers.