



*March 30, 2021 Testimony in support of Senate Bill 778*

*To: Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary*

*From: Leani García Torres, Associate Director, State & Local Initiatives, New American Economy*

My name is Leani García Torres, Associate Director of State and Local Initiatives at New American Economy, a bipartisan research and advocacy organization fighting for smart, humane federal, state, and local immigration policies that help grow our economy and create jobs for all Americans.

I am testifying in strong support of the creation of an Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement in Oregon. To this end, I respectfully encourage the passage of Senate Bill 778. Over the past several years, my organization, in collaboration with World Education Services (WES), has worked with leaders in government, business, and civil society across the country to establish and support permanent state-level offices that play a critical role as the conduit between immigrant and refugee communities, the private sector and employers, nonprofits, state agencies, and the governor's administration. These offices facilitate the social, economic, and cultural integration of new Americans by coordinating and supporting existing efforts across state agencies and local nonprofits, engaging the private sector to attract international talent that can help mitigate critical workforce shortages and secure employment for refugee and immigrant communities, advise the governor, and serve as a centralized clearinghouse for information and services for refugee and immigrant communities, among other duties.

Last year, Virginia enacted legislation to establish such a statewide office bringing the total number of states with such offices or senior advisor positions in our network to twelve. In each case, these states recognize the positive economic and social impact of facilitating and supporting immigrant integration, and new offices waste no time in making an impact. The Nevada Governor's Office of New Americans, established in June of 2019, recently launched the Esperanza Fund, a public-private fund for immigrants affected by COVID-19 who do not qualify for federal or state aid. Meanwhile, New Jersey's Office of New Americans, founded the same year via executive order, is playing a critical role in expanding immigrant access to professional and occupational licenses, helping this population meet the state's pressing workforce needs.

While the policy areas each office focuses on — and direct services they provide — varies based on the needs of each state, this diverse group of offices has found success in supporting immigrant and refugee communities by:

- Supporting the economic integration of immigrants and refugees, including by addressing relevant needs and barriers across the skills and education spectrum;
- Coordinating and providing technical assistance and guidance to other state agencies to assist them in best identifying and meeting the needs of immigrant and refugee communities;
- Playing a convening role between state agencies, immigrant service providers, the business community, and other stakeholders;

- Promoting fundamental pathways to immigrant integration, including English language classes, citizenship preparation, workforce development, language access, community engagement and planning, and laws ensuring fair and equal treatment;
- Championing the rights of immigrants and act as an advocate for local, state, and federal policies that support immigrant and refugee communities and create a welcoming state;
- Managing refugee coordination for the state; and
- Ensuring that immigrants and refugees are included in states' COVID-19 emergency response and long-term recovery efforts, including addressing language and access barriers to the COVID vaccine.

To help illustrate why this measure is so important, and why it makes sense to think of an Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement in Oregon as an economic integration and workforce issue and not only as an issue pertaining to state services, my organization has conducted quantitative research on the impact immigrants and refugees already have on the state of Oregon. What we found is striking:

- **In 2019, Oregon's immigrants and refugees made up just 9.9 percent of the population but played an outsized role in industries critical to the state's economy across sectors and the skills spectrum** including crop production (44.3 percent), electronics manufacturing (34.2 percent), software developers (25.7 percent) and other engineers (34.5 percent), and home health aides (15.9 percent).
- **In 2019, 79.9 percent of immigrant Oregonians were working age** (ages 16-64) compared to 61.9 percent of U.S.-born Oregonians. They paid \$4.2 billion in taxes — including \$1.3 billion in state and local taxes — and held \$11.0 billion in spending power that is reinjected into the state and local economies.
- **In 2019, 97.0 percent of Oregon's likely refugee population was employed**, contributing \$427.6 million in taxes — including \$128.0 million in state and local taxes — and holding \$1.0 billion in spending power.

Providing a centralized clearinghouse for services and a cohesive state strategy for the social and economic integration of immigrants and refugees is critical for supporting and expanding this impact. Oregon is in a position to take decisive action to support and leverage the skills of the state's future workforce by encouraging — and recognizing the myriad benefits of — better integration. I encourage the Judiciary Committee to support the passage of Senate Bill 778.

Thank you for your consideration,

Leani García Torres  
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