

MIRC POLICY PRIORITIES 2024 -2026 Legislative Session Framework

Executive Summary

The Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition (MIRC) is committed to advancing policies that promote equity, economic opportunity, and social integration for immigrant communities in Maine. MIRC operates at the intersection of policy, service provision, and community organizing to ensure that immigrants can thrive in Maine.

The 2024 elections have pushed immigration to the forefront of all policy conversations and made the topic a hot-button issue. Maine's federal congressional delegation has historically been responsive to its constituents. To ensure our State and Federal delegations are aware and representative of their communities' needs, we must have constituents at the forefront of our meetings with elected officials in these challenging political times. MIRC will assist our community members in making sure they have the training and talking point support they need to lead these meetings and connect with their representatives.

As we enter a time of uncertainty and for many, fear, it is important to strengthen our partnerships and utilize our networks to support the communities we serve. Direct service providers responding to needs in the community and policy partners with expertise in government resources will work closer together to bring credible information directly to communities.

This document outlines MIRC's policy priorities and strategies for the 132nd Maine legislature and 119th United States Congress sessions, which aim to address challenges in **housing, transportation, access to resources, economic opportunity and workforce development, and civil rights and anti-discrimination protections**. These priorities are informed by coalition members and the experiences of immigrants across the state.

Key components of this strategy include:

1. The redevelopment of the MIRC Policy Committee with subcommittees dedicated to specific pillars, ensuring focused and collaborative efforts on legislative and rule-making processes.
2. Integration with the Asylum Seeker Working Group (ASWG) to identify critical needs, provide testimony, and strengthen connections between service providers and advocates.
3. A legislative bill tracker to monitor bills introduced in Augusta, prioritize actions, and triage support or defense strategies based on the needs identified by stakeholders.

Through this structure, MIRC seeks to build a stronger, more inclusive Maine where immigrants are fully empowered as economic contributors and community members.

MISSION STATEMENT

To improve the legal, social, and economic conditions experienced by Maine's immigrants – enhancing their lives while strengthening Maine – through advocacy, information sharing, and collaboration both through and among our member organizations

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Priorities and Policy Summary #IMPACTINGIMMIGRANTCOMMUNITIES

- **Strengthening Civil Rights and Anti-Discrimination Protections**
- **Access to Resources and Services**
- **Housing Access and Stability**
- **Economic Opportunity and Workforce Development**
- **Transportation Equity**

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Strengthening Civil Rights and Anti-Discrimination Protections

Background:

Legislation in this arena struggled the most during the 131st session. Given the mass deportations being promised by the incoming administration, rise in anti-immigrant bills being introduced, and civil liberties being threatened the information we provide to community members will be crucial to share in a fast and efficient manner. These protections start at home at the local and state level.

Goal:

Safeguard immigrant communities from discrimination and protect their civil rights.

•Talking Point: Our neighbors, students, and the people that make up our community deserve to live a life free from fear.

When people live in fear it is difficult for them to thrive. When people are working with misinformation they make imperfect decisions hurting themselves and families.

Policy Objectives:

- **Anti-Discrimination Legislation:** Enhance protections against discrimination in housing, employment, and education based on immigration status.
- **Law Enforcement Oversight:** Establish stronger protections against collaboration between local law enforcement and immigration enforcement agencies.
- **Protections of Community Spaces:** Safeguard areas of worship, education, and healthcare from disruptions.
- **Rapid Response Advocacy:** Expand programs to educate immigrants on their rights and connect them with legal resources.

Importance:

If civil rights are diminished and anti-discrimination allowed to flourish people in Maine can face difficulties in:

- Living healthy lives
- Contributing to their communities
- Providing for their families

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Access to Resources and Services

ackground:

Resources in Maine have been trending towards being more inclusive. In the healthcare arena, pregnant **mothers and those under 21** regardless of immigration status have been granted eligibility under MaineCare. Peer Workforce Navigators have helped connect members of the community with employment opportunities in various sectors. General Assistance has provided immigrant communities with an opportunity to settle into communities. Budget proposals indicate that some of these services may see reduced funding and or no longer be funded, posing a risk for people who rely on those services.

Goal: Create a welcoming environment where immigrants and Mainers can equitably access public resources, healthcare, and social services.

Talking Point:

Most immigrants in the U.S., particularly noncitizens, face strict limitations on accessing public benefits. This includes programs like Medicaid, food stamps (SNAP), and cash assistance, from which undocumented immigrants are almost entirely barred. Even many lawful permanent residents (green card holders) must wait five years before they qualify for these benefits.

Policy Objectives:

- **Language Access Standards:** Enforce language-access policies for public agencies, ensuring immigrants receive vital information and services.
- **Healthcare Accessibility:** Advocate for expanded eligibility in state-funded health programs and improved access to culturally competent care.
- **Resource Awareness Programs:** Develop outreach campaigns to inform immigrants about available assistance programs and support systems.
- **Social Services Integration:** Promote partnerships between immigrant-serving organizations and government agencies to streamline access.

Importance:

Without access to resources people in Maine can face difficulties in:

- Living healthy lives
- Contributing to their communities
- Providing for their families

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Housing Access and Stability

Background:

Access to affordable housing has been a top priority for Maine residents for a number of years. The state has taken steps to alleviate some of the issues and encourage future construction of the housing supply. Shelters in Southern Maine are constantly full as people struggle to find affordable housing. Transitional Services are stretched thin in some places and non-existent in most of the state. Recent reports indicate that Maine needs to build between **38,500 and 84,000 new homes by 2030** to meet current and future demand. It is a top priority for our coalition that those who reside in our communities have the opportunity to find a place they can call home.

Goal: Create pathways for immigrants and working-class Mainers to have access to safe, affordable, and stable housing.

Talking Points:

- Immigration plays a significant role in the demand and supply of the U.S. housing market, **contributing** to economic growth and **revitalizing** neighborhoods.
- However, the relationship between immigration and housing costs is often oversimplified and has become increasingly **politicized**. While immigrants do contribute to rising housing demand, they are not the **primary drivers** of increasing housing costs.
- Factors such as housing shortages, restrictive zoning laws, and shifts in housing preferences are more dominant forces behind rising prices. Furthermore, immigrant workers are essential to the housing supply, making up a crucial segment of the **construction workforce** that can address shortages and improve housing stock.

Policy Objectives:

- **Affordable Housing Development:** Advocate for increased state funding and construction of affordable housing units, particularly in areas with high immigrant populations and **historic underproduction**.
- **Tenant Protections and Resources:** Strengthen anti-displacement policies and tenant rights, including safeguards against unfair evictions, rental discrimination, and General Assistance.
- **Emergency Housing Programs:** Expand support for shelter employees, those in shelters, and transitional housing programs while reducing barriers to accessing assistance.
- **• oning Reform:** Promote inclusionary zoning policies to increase affordable housing stock and combat exclusionary practices.

Importance:

The **lack of affordable housing can make it difficult for:**

- Employers to fill job openings
- Seniors to downsize and age in place
- Young people to remain in or return to the communities in which they grew up
- People in Maine to settle down and make meaningful contributions to their communities

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Economic Opportunity and Workforce Development

Background:

The creation of the Office of New Americans in Maine will assist many get connected to resources and employment opportunities around the state. Immigrants contributed **\$625 million to the Maine economy in 2022** and account for 4.5% of Maine's labor force, playing a vital role in supporting the state's economy. Over half of Maine's immigrant population has become naturalized citizens. Work permit and Asylum backlogs have posed challenges in people being able to settle into communities but have been seeing many success stories. Maines immigrant population works in various sectors across the state throughout the states history.

Goal: Promote policies that enable immigrants to contribute fully to Maine's economy and workforce.

- **Talking Point:** As community members, business owners, taxpayers, and workers, immigrants are essential to Maine's diverse and vibrant communities, contributing significantly to the well-being and prosperity of the state.

Policy Objectives:

- **Credential Recognition:** Establish pathways for recognizing foreign professional certifications and skills to integrate immigrant talent into the workforce.
- **Job Training and Placement:** Expand workforce development programs, including ESL training, vocational skills, and apprenticeships.
- **Fair Labor Protections:** Strengthen enforcement of labor laws, ensuring immigrant workers receive fair wages and protections from exploitation.
- **Work Permit Advocacy:** Reduce the period which people have to wait in order to obtain a work permit and make work permits continuously valid through the entire asylum adjudication process

Importance:

Without access to Economic Opportunity and Workforce Development people in Maine can face difficulties in:

- Living healthy lives
- Contributing to their communities
- Providing for their families

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Transportation Equity

Background:

Public transportation is scarce around the state with some locations experiencing a lack of drivers. Resources for people in Maine often require people to move between towns and cities without reliable transportation. Interstate mobility is important to people in Maine as they seek to live healthy lives, connect with new employment opportunities, and contribute to their communities.

Goal: Create accessible, affordable, and reliable transportation systems to connect immigrant, BIPOC, low-income, and communities in need to jobs, education, and essential services.

Talking point:

People need to get from Point A to Point B, and not every town has ALL the resources. Instead of telling people, "You can't get there from here," let's provide those in Maine with the means to get there!

Policy Objectives:

- **Driver's License Pathways:** Provide pathways for more youths to participate in Drivers Education. Eliminate residency requirements for driver's licenses and state IDs to improve mobility and employment opportunities.
- **Public Transit Expansion:** Advocate for increased funding to expand transit routes, frequency, and language accessibility.
- **Rural Access Programs:** Support innovative solutions such as ride-share programs and micro-transit options for underserved areas.
- **Language Access and Outreach:** Ensure transportation systems include multilingual signage, schedules, and real-time updates to reduce barriers to use.

Importance:

Without reliable transportation people in Maine can face difficulties in:

- Attending Healthcare appointments
- Accessing necessary resources like grocery, education, and employment
- Others?

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