

# Janet Mills issues executive order creating Office of New Americans in Maine

Maine Public | By [Kevin Miller](#)

Published August 2, 2023 at 5:47 PM EDT



*Robert F. Bukaty / AP File*

Gov. Janet Mills delivers her State of the Budget address, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023, at the State House in Augusta, Maine.

Gov. Janet Mills announced Wednesday that her administration will create a new office aimed at helping new immigrants enter the workforce and contribute to Maine communities.

The proposed Office of New Americans would add Maine to the list of more than a dozen states with stand-alone agencies aimed at better integrating recent immigrants into the local economy, schools and general society.

Maine Public Radio

**All Things Considered with ...**

Like many states, Maine is struggling to accommodate a surge in asylum seekers, many of whom arrive in the United States with trade skills or professional experience but who are temporarily barred from working under federal law. Maine is also experiencing a worker shortage across many business sectors, including health care and construction.

So Mills is directing staff within her administration to work with stakeholders — including the immigrant community along with business and educational groups — to create a plan for an Office of New Americans to open next year. According to the governor's office, the new agency will have an "overarching goal of ensuring that Maine is effectively incorporating immigrants into its workforce and communities to strengthen the economy over the long term."

"My order will develop a plan for a new office to help us ensure that Maine is fully drawing on the talents and skills of those who want to live and work in and contribute to our great state," Mills said in a statement. "This is a critical step for Maine's economic future as we address our workforce shortage and support our communities and businesses."

Hannah Pingree, whose Office of Policy Innovation and the Future will lead the planning process, said the Office of New Americans will aim to ensure both new arrivals and existing immigrants are connected to businesses and that municipalities have the resources that they need.

"Our economy is growing. We need workers. Every employer practically across the state — public, private, everywhere else — tells us they need workers," Pingree said in an interview. "So the ability to connect people more rapidly to work and the ability to welcome people in diverse communities across our state I think is a really exciting opportunity. We are excited to work on the plan this fall and bring it back to the governor and the Legislature."

Thousands of asylum seekers have arrived in Maine in recent years from Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries. However, federal law prohibits asylum seekers from working until 180 days after they have filed an asylum

Maine Public Radio

**All Things Considered with ...**

application, forcing many of those individuals to rely on municipal general assistance for housing and other support.

That influx has put tremendous strain — both financial and logistical — on social services agencies in the Greater Portland area as well as the organizations that work with immigrants. Homeless shelters are at capacity and, as a result, many asylum seekers have joined the growing ranks of unhoused people on the streets of Portland and other towns.

Mills, Maine's congressional delegation and bipartisan members of the Legislature are pushing to shorten the timeline before asylum seekers can work. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services is also working on a longer-term review of Maine's general assistance policies in response to the surging demand for GA among new arrivals.

Pingree said that review is happening separate from the planning process for the Office of New Americans. But experience has shown that assisting asylum seekers from the beginning can help get them into the workforce faster.

Business and immigrant assistance groups cheered the governor's plan to create a new office.

"It has been impossible to keep up with new immigrant arrivals in Maine without one entity to coordinate the multiple agencies, organizations, and municipalities performing this work," Mufalo Chitam, executive director of Maine Immigrants' Rights Coalition, said in a statement. "Such an office can help address this need, and we look forward to assisting in the effort to develop a strong plan for its creation."

"The state's economic development plan makes clear we need to aggressively expand our workforce by 2030, and there's no better way to do that than by harnessing the skills, experience, and education of foreign-born professionals," Quincy Hentzel, president & CEO of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce, said in a statement. "While recognizing the importance of broader federal initiatives to address this issue, we extend our deepest gratitude to the Governor for spearheading this transformative effort to position Maine as a welcoming state to live, work, and grow."

agencies or staff members working on immigrant integration.

Tags

Politics

New England News Collaborative

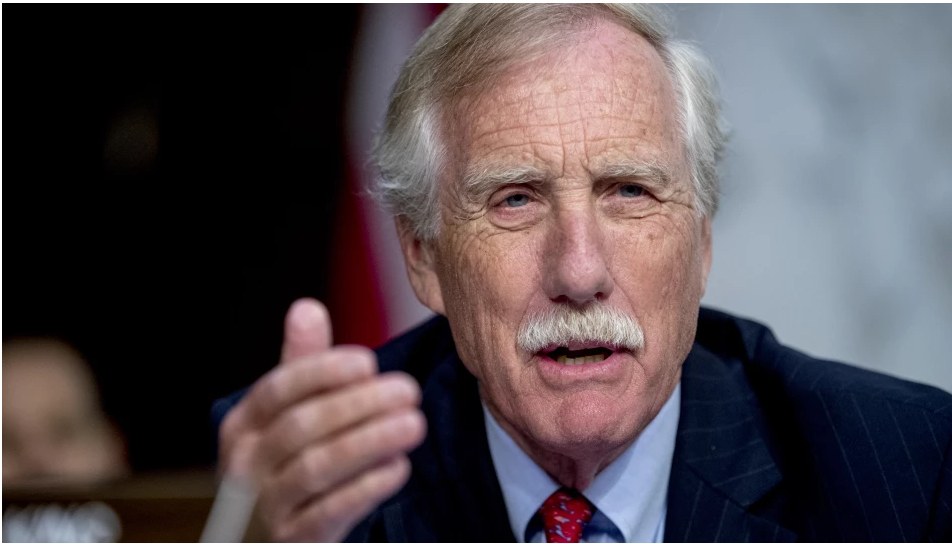


**Kevin Miller**

kmiller@mainepublic.org

[See stories by Kevin Miller](#)

## More Politics



**1 Angus King proposes limits on semi-automatic guns, magazine capacity after Lewiston shooting**

**2 Maine will no longer require older heating systems to be disconnected to get heat pump rebates**

**3 'Right to repair' PAC hit with reduced fine for campaign finance rule violation**

Maine Public Radio

**All Things Considered with ...**

## 4 State and ACLU offer revised agreement to settle indigent case

---

## 5 About a third of voting-age Mainers cast ballots last Election Day

---



Stay Connected

© 2023 Maine Public | Registered 501(c)(3) EIN: 22-3171529

Support

Contact Us

Careers

Privacy Policy

Sign Up

