

Written Testimony of Laurent F. Gilbert, Sr.
Mayor
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Before the U.S. Senate
Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration,
Refugees and Border Security
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Chairman Schumer, Senator Cornyn, distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on the benefits of immigration reform for renewing America's communities.

My name is Laurent F. Gilbert, Sr. and I am currently serving as the Mayor of the All-America City of Lewiston, Maine, a designation awarded to us in 2007 by the National Civic League. As my biography will attest, my lifelong career has been in law enforcement until my election as mayor in 2007.

I am a first generation American, born and residing in Maine for most of my life.. My mother was one of 18 children and my father one of 11 in his family. Both came to the U.S. during the 1920's from the Province of Quebec, Canada. They were part of the one million migrants from Canada who emigrated to the United States between 1860 and 1930. The significant majority of these Francophone immigrants arrived in New England to work in the textile mills and shoe shops. Both of my parents were part of the child labor force and developed a work ethic that is still prevalent among many Franco-Americans in New England.

As a child born in Lewiston and the son of immigrants from Quebec, French was my primary language at home. I attended Catholic Schools in this predominantly French Canadian community and received my instruction from nuns who also emigrated from Quebec. Our classes were split with courses in French instruction in the morning and English instruction in the afternoon.

At the age of 10, we moved to Southern California where I attended elementary school, high school and started college. We lived there 14 years before returning to Maine. While in school, I had a great many Mexican-American friends. As a son of immigrants, I could relate to my Mexican-American classmate friends. I would at times trade my sandwich with a Mexican student for his burrito—something I continue to love to this day.

Somali refugees started arriving in Lewiston in 2001 to seek a quality-of-life they could not find or afford in many larger cities such as Atlanta, Memphis and Nashville. These family-oriented refugees were fearful of life in those cities where they were exposed to criminal activity, drugs and gang violence. They had fled violence abroad and in some cases in their refugee camps and

were seeking what all Americans seek in their lives--a home where an individual or family can live peacefully and become part of a community.

Word of mouth to friends and relatives outside of Maine led more secondary-migrants to Lewiston, a city and state that are statistically one of the safest in the country and where these families and their children can receive a good education. Since 2001, secondary migrant relocations to Lewiston are estimated to be around 4,000 refugees primarily from Somalia. Asylum seekers from Somalia and Sudan, and more recently those seeking asylum from Djibouti, have settled in Lewiston. Our twin-city of Auburn has received some 1,000 refugees, primarily from Somalia.

As the refugee population started to grow in Lewiston a great many residents became concerned about the new secondary arrivals that have occurred every single month going back to 2002. A number of opinions about the new refugee arrivals were expressed both privately and publicly as fear and in many cases prejudice fueled the public and sometimes political discussion about Lewiston's "new Mainers." There was fear of the cultural differences, dress, and race differences in the "whitest state in the nation" (as determined by the 2000 Census).

Some of the reported conflicts in the schools and public questions about the relocations came to the attention of the then sitting mayor. The mayor wrote an open letter to the Somali leaders asking them to stem the tide of in-migration by the Somali population.

Media reports of the mayor's letter enraged the Somali leaders who demonstrated their disfavor publically which caught the attention of both the national and international media.

The intense media coverage also caught the attention of a national hate group called "The World Church of the Creator" headed by Nathan Hale who was convicted of threatening the life of a federal judge in Chicago and is now serving his sentence in a federal prison.

Though the hate group planned to demonstrate in Lewiston with some 250 demonstrators, they only attracted 30 people to their event. More notably, the hate group's public announcement of their planned presence in Lewiston produced one of the largest civil rights public demonstrations in the state's history.

Across town, at Bates College some 5,000 demonstrators from throughout New England, led by the newly created "Many and One Coalition," demonstrated in support of the refugee population. This extraordinary demonstration of public support for our new refugee residents and the counter-rally's opposition against all expressions of hate, resulted in a resounding expression of public support for our immigrant population and, as importantly, resulted in no public violence of any kind. It was truly a shining moment for our city and for the entire State of Maine.

Though there was measurably more public, state, non-profit and academic support for the refugees following the Lewiston rally, rumors and misguided myths about refugees, funding, cultural and religious customs persisted. To this day, these rumors and myths about free food, cars, special prayer rooms for Muslims in the public schools and the like add fuel to a fire that has not been fully extinguished in the minds of many residents.

For many of the misinformed, it is perceived that refugees are taking resources away from local residents as the increased competition for reduced levels of federal and state social services by qualified refugees will make it harder to qualify for welfare cash assistance; priority for low income housing; and medical services as “native” individuals are pushed to the back of an otherwise eligible list.

Lewiston’s high unemployment rate, which has remained at about 9% since the beginning of 2009, is assumed to be much higher within the refugee population. In the recently published book “Somalis in Maine: Crossing Cultural Currents,” Deputy City Administrator Phil Nadeau’s essay showed that employment levels had been steadily declining since 2006. Nadeau postulates that the combination of higher levels of overall unemployment and the significant underfunding of workforce training for underskilled and undereducated, limited English speaking populations, will continue to fuel refugee unemployment challenges in Lewiston and in other parts of the country with similar refugee populations.

Though there are certainly many misinformed and misguided notions about our new refugee residents, what has been researched and reported by the city is that inadequate federal funding associated with a refugee resettlement program simply does not meet the many needs of our refugee residents. The thousands of secondary migrants for which the Office of Refugee Resettlement provides little to no direct funding have largely been left behind as the responsibility of local government.

For example, if a family is initially settled in Atlanta, Georgia and after two months they decide to move to Lewiston, Maine, the remaining six-months of the eight month funding does not follow them. This creates a severe financial burden on the receiving community. (See the July 21, 2010 report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations entitled “Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a U.S. Resettlement System that is Not Working.” In particular see Ranking Member, Senator Richard G. Lugar’s Letter of Transmittal to this committee.)

Some community members perceive that the new arrivals do not want to learn English or adapt to our culture. Some residents become angry when observing groups of refugee adults gathering on the sidewalks in our downtown and perceive that activity as their unwillingness to work. In reality, many refugee adults are in need of intense ESL (English as a Second Language) education and employment training which is severely underfunded and cannot meet the needs of an economy which demands no less than a high school education. For many refugee adults, the prospect of attaining an eighth grade education is unlikely given the federal government’s unwillingness to support comprehensive work ready programming upon their arrival.

As mayor and with a law enforcement career background, I see it as my responsibility to lead by example. I have reached out to the refugee/immigrant community and advocated on their behalf in the state capital and here in Washington. I have had new immigrants serve on my advisory committee during my campaign for office. My wife and I attend their annual Somali and United States Independence Day celebrations. We eat and dance with our new Mainers. On the street I greet them in their language which at times brings surprise followed by a smile and a like response. Genuine outreach is critical. I have established friendships with many immigrants.

In my last employ before becoming mayor, I trained over 600 police officers throughout Maine in “Cultural Awareness for Law Enforcement.” I would bring in three to four refugee/immigrants from nearly 20 different countries throughout the world. Although there were differences, what rose to the surface with all the different cultures, were the similarities. These were quality of life issues such as family life, employment, education, religion, music, etc., that which we all seek. Officers could see that we truly are one-humanity

Collaboration and education are keys to success. As a city, we took the lead in forming collaborative partnerships in order to service the immigrant population and educated community service providers and community members. Educating all partners on the cultures reduces anxiety and results in more welcoming attitudes as does educating the immigrants on our culture.

We collaborated with the state Career Center (employment agency) to enhance employment opportunities for refugees. Given the almost complete absence of workforce training funding, the city was awarded a special Economic Development Administration appropriation for a refugee workforce development demonstration project. The funding focused on job coaching, resume writing and other work ready skills to prepare refugees for the American workplace. Although very limited, the federal funding has demonstrated that refugees can become better prepared for the workplace and that employment can reduce the burden on local taxpayers which in turn reduces resident hostility.

Our school department has done some exemplary work to reduce student tensions and educate staff. Their work has evolved and has resulted in a student-teacher-administration approach that has produced so few internal cultural and racial conflicts within the school that the Center for the Prevention of Hate often refers to their work as a model for other schools to emulate.

Over the years, we also met with various ethnic groups to learn more about their culture and needs. Since 2001 many more players have joined the collaboration and ongoing community workshops are held to open the communication between community members and immigrants.

Education reduces the rumors and encourages a welcoming atmosphere. A few ethnic self-help groups have emerged along with many immigrant-owned businesses that have been established on the main street of our downtown and surrounding areas. This has increased overall community interaction with our refugee residents (and refugee business people) and dispels some of the misunderstandings about the immigrant work ethic.

Our immigrant entrepreneurs are bringing new life and energy to the downtown. In a couple of downtown blocks of our main street, over a dozen immigrant-owned businesses occupy formerly vacant storefronts. The businesses include general merchandise markets, specialty foods and good, restaurants, coffee shops, tax preparation services, translation services and clothing stores. Some have started taxi-cab companies.

A large number of our residential downtown tenement buildings are from a by-gone era where our Franco-American mill workers use to live. Many of these apartments are now occupied by Somali and other immigrant families. If we didn't have our immigrant population occupying

these rents, I would be significantly concerned at the loss of property tax revenue as many of those buildings would likely experience higher vacancy levels forcing reductions in property values which would then place further strains on our local budget.

In my opinion, our immigrant population is having a positive impact on the social fabric of our community and our local economy. They purchase groceries, clothing, cars along with a number of other goods and services. They keep the dollars circulating locally. The young have integrated in our schools, play on sports teams and develop friendships while more and more adults are beginning to weave themselves into the day-to-day social, sporting, cultural and political activities of the community

One day as I was leaving city hall and going to my car parked adjacent to our city park, I saw Somali immigrant boys and girls running around and hiding behind trees, falling down and playing as they spoke only English. I asked them what they were playing. They responded “cops and robbers.” What is more American than that? I thought to myself, “We’re there.”

The intense media and public scrutiny of years past has settled over the years and greater acceptance is occurring as time goes on. As is often the case with first generation immigrant arrivals, it is the young who are quickest to meld into the fabric of American life. Consequently, and to the chagrin of many immigrant parents, westernization is slowly taking hold with the young who appear eager to assimilate.

The road to full assimilation into American culture isn’t easy but with perseverance and support it will happen. It takes at least one to two generations to truly be fully assimilated. It has happened with all ethnicities that make up America and our experience in Lewiston will be no different.

Immigration has been a hot-button issue in Maine and around the country recently, and with good reason. From birthright citizenship to in-state tuition and employee verification, the immigration debate has passionate proponents on both sides. But what gets lost in these impassioned arguments is that there are other areas of immigration reform – areas that have potentially larger importance to our day to day lives—that go largely ignored even though they enjoy broad consensus.

As mayor, I have worked with the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) whose mission is to advance the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, housing, health and civil rights of the Hispanic population of the United States.

To that end I have worked with LULAC’s Maine Chapter in strong support for the Dream Act. To preserve our principles of fundamental fairness and justice in this country, it is imperative that this be a very fundamental first step in comprehensive immigration reform while concomitantly not wasting our human capital for our economic benefit.

I have also served as a trainer in Human Trafficking, today’s modern day slavery that requires our full attention to end this, the most profitable crime in the world. No state or country is immune to this madness.

I am a member of the Partnership for a New American Economy, a group of some 300 mayors and business leaders from 40 states who believe in sensible immigration reform that will spur economic growth and create American jobs. **As a partnership we believe that any immigration reform efforts should include the following principles:**

- Secure our borders and prevent illegal immigration through tougher enforcement and better use of technology;
- Develop a simple and secure system for employers to verify employment eligibility and hold businesses that are not compliant, or abuse visa programs, accountable for their actions.
- Increase opportunities for immigrants to enter the United States workforce – and for foreign students to stay in the United States to work – so that we can attract and keep the best, the brightest and the hardest-working, who will strengthen our economy’
- Create a streamlined process by which employers can get the seasonal and permanent employees they need, when Americans aren’t filling vacant jobs;
- Establish a path to legal status for the undocumented currently living in the United States with requirements such as registering with the federal government, learning English, paying taxes and following all laws;
and
- Strengthen federal, state, local, and employer-sponsored programs that offer English language, civics, and educational classes to immigrants.

Partnership for a New American Economy facts and thoughts to consider

Economics of Immigrants

- **Immigrants help create companies and businesses:**
 - o 40% of Fortune 500 companies were started by immigrants or the children of immigrants. The combined revenue of these companies would be a GDP greater than every country in the world except U.S., China and Japan.
 - o 25% of all high-tech startups have immigrant founders, creating close 450,000 jobs.
 - o Immigrants are more than twice as likely to start a new business as native-born Americans.
- **Immigrants help the high-end and low-end of the economy:**

- o Hiring high-skilled immigrants at tech companies correlates with creating 5 additional jobs because immigrants often work in R&D or exports – leading to growth for the whole company.
- o Each agriculture job creates 3 additional, often higher-paying jobs such as managing the farm, packaging and marketing, building and selling farm equipment, etc.
- o Without workers, we lose the farms – we have already lost 84,000 acres of production and 22,000 jobs in agriculture to Mexico.
- **Immigrants help cities:**
 - o Cities with the fastest economic growth were the cities with the greatest growth in immigrant workforce (1990 -2006).
 - o Around the country, cities are starting to actively recruit immigrants to help buy homes, start companies which will help real estate values and increase the tax base; Global Detroit, Global Cleveland, Global Pittsburgh are actively trying to increase immigration to bolster local economies.

Reform Goals of the Partnership for a New American Economy

- **Comprehensive Reform:**
Partnership supports Comprehensive Immigration Reform that would secure our borders, increase legal immigration and provide a path for those already here illegally. But if that isn't immediately possible, we believe we will help both the debate on immigration and the economy by finding areas of bipartisan agreement where immigration can help the economy and moving forward on those measures.
- **Short-term goals:**
 - o **Green cards for immigrants with advanced degrees from U.S. universities in science, technology, engineering, math and other essential fields (possibly business, management, etc.).**
 - o Roughly 40 percent of master's degrees in engineering, computer science, and math awarded in the United States go to foreign nationals.
 - o Among people with advanced degrees, immigrants are three-times more likely to file patents than U.S. born citizens.
- **Create a new visa program dedicated to immigrant entrepreneurs. (Allow American money to bring in foreign talent to start their idea in the U.S. If they create enough jobs, they get a green card.)**
 - o Over 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants.
 - o Immigrants founded 25 percent of all high-tech startups from 1995-2005, creating almost 450,000 new jobs.

- **Raise or eliminate the caps on temporary visas and green cards for high-skilled workers**
 - o In 2007 and 2008, H-1B visas (visas for temporary high-skilled workers) were used in a matter of days and even during the recession; the limit has been reached before the end of the year.
 - o Roughly 15 percent of the annual green card total are for employment, a much lower percent than countries such as Canada or Australia.
- **Improve guest-worker programs for agriculture and other seasonal work for when American businesses can't fill those jobs.**
 - o According to the Department of Labor survey, roughly 50 percent of seasonal agricultural labor is here illegally. Since this is self-reported, the numbers may be higher.
 - o For example, could simplify by reducing number of government agencies involved in the program (DOL; DHS; State Department and local State Workforce Agency)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I appreciate the interest of the Chairman, the Ranking Member, and the Committee for this opportunity to share Lewiston's newest chapter in our ongoing immigrant story. I believe that the Committee's and Congress's continued involvement with immigration reform and the need for significant refugee resettlement reform is critical to the future success of a refugee resettlement program whose primary mission is economic self-sufficiency. Thank you.