

ACT 207

S.B. NO. 2787

A Bill for an Act Relating to Immigration.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Hawaii:

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that there is an unfulfilled need in the State for broad-based, dedicated services for recent immigrants to assist them with issues relating to language access; legal issues relating to their status as immigrants; acculturation with respect to legal responsibilities, employment responsibilities, family matters, and other acculturation issues; employment searches; support for their children's education; access to health care; inclusion and civic engagement; and a myriad of other challenges and opportunities.

The legislature also finds that Hawaii has a long history of welcoming immigrants. Immigrants and their children have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to the State, including the State's economy, workforce, and community.

The legislature further finds that immigrants comprise two hundred seventy thousand persons, or eighteen per cent, of Hawaii's population, including 145,000 persons who are naturalized citizens. Immigrants come to Hawaii from many countries; almost half of all immigrants in the State come from the Philippines. Immigrants make up forty per cent of agricultural workers, thirty-three per cent of tourism and hospitality workers, and twenty-three per cent of health care workers in the State.

The legislature further finds that other states provide immigrant and refugee services through state-funded offices with dedicated staff and program funds for immigrant integration. These offices also coordinate with other government and community agencies and apply for federal resources. This type of office exists in Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, and New York. In California, the department of social services has an immigrant services bureau that ensures the effective development and implementation of programs to support legal services, outreach, community education, and other integration efforts. Many cities across the nation, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle, have also established comprehensive, government-funded offices for immigrant and refugee affairs. Many of these offices provide funds for English language training, translation and interpretation, workforce development, and legal services related to immigration status, naturalization, and accessing government services. In Hawaii, the counties of Maui and Hawaii have offices offering limited services, but there are none in the county of Kauai or the city and county of Honolulu.

Pursuant to House Concurrent Resolution No. 169 (2021), the legislature convened a working group to “improve access to government services for immigrants and increase immigrant opportunities to make civic and economic contributions to the community.” As part of the working group, community groups identified the office of community services as the best state agency to service immigrants and suggested that the office be given dedicated staff to address immigrant and refugee matters. In response, Act 256, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, provided \$1,000,000 to the office of community services to reinstate immigrant resource centers and to support nonprofit immigrant service agencies. The legislature notes that in 1985, the office of community services was established as an attached agency to the department of labor and industrial relations. The legislative mandate of the office of community services is to serve low-income individuals, immigrants, and refugees.

The legislature believes that further action is needed to support programs for Hawaii’s immigrants and refugees, support immigrant services, and ensure that new immigrants have equal access to government services.

Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to establish an immigration services and access unit within the office of community services and provide for additional dedicated staff and additional program funds to allow the office of community services to meet its full legislative mandate.

SECTION 2. Chapter 371K, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is amended by adding a new section to be appropriately designated and to read as follows:

“§371K- Immigration services and access unit. The office of community services shall establish within the office an immigration services and access unit to provide for immigration services and access through program activities as described in this section. The purpose of the immigration services and access unit shall be to promote immigrant economic self-sufficiency, community inclusion, and integration. The immigration services and access unit shall provide statewide services, coordinate with relevant government and nonprofit agencies, and approve contracts with qualified nonprofit organizations to support integration and civic engagement. The immigration services and access unit shall also be responsible for the immigrant resource centers, administration of the refugee program, and management of other programs relating to immigrants.”

SECTION 3. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$450,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2024-2025 to fund the immigrant services and access unit within the office of community services, to be expended as follows:

- (1) \$80,000 to establish one full-time equivalent (1.0 FTE) unit supervisor position;
- (2) \$48,000 to establish one full-time equivalent (1.0 FTE) fiscal clerk position;
- (3) \$12,000 as operation funds, including funds for on-site monitoring, legal review costs, printing costs, and travel expenses to attend conference training;
- (4) \$300,000 to expand the immigration resource centers to provide more direct client assistance for naturalization fees and replacement of U.S. Customs and Border Protection Form I-94 Arrival/Departure Records, and to specifically provide further assistance to immigrants affected by the August 2023 Maui wildfires; and
- (5) \$10,000 for furniture and equipment for the newly established positions.

The sum appropriated shall be expended by the department of labor and industrial relations for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 4. New statutory material is underscored.¹

SECTION 5. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2024.

(Approved July 5, 2024.)

Note

1. Edited pursuant to HRS §23G-16.5.