



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
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To: Joint Standing Committee on Government Oversight
From: Representative Raegan LaRochelle and Representative Bill Bridgeo
Subject: OPEGA Study and Hearing Request

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Fay and distinguished members of the Government Oversight Committee:

Last session, the Health and Human Services Committee held a hearing to discuss occupational safety in our state psychiatric facilities. At that time, the committee heard testimony from hospital administrators, a lead psychiatrist and a Department of Health and Human Services official. However, the hearing failed to include crucial testimony from staff at these facilities.

Staff at both Riverview Psychiatric Center in Augusta and the Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center in Bangor have written publicly and to state officials directly about dangerously inadequate staffing levels. They have communicated that they were dismayed by their lack of inclusion during the Health and Human Services Committee hearing and expressed concerns that administrators were either unaware of the reality of their working conditions or intentionally downplaying them.

Riverview and Dorothea Dix employees work directly with some of the most dangerous and severely mentally ill people in Maine, many of whom enter the facilities from prison or jail. Some patients have committed violent crimes. Courts may have determined they pose an imminent risk of harm to themselves or others, are incompetent to stand trial or are not criminally responsible for their actions. Patients in crisis and other safety concerns at Maine's state psychiatric facilities are addressed using methods appropriate for a health care setting.

The hospitals are currently not safe for employees because they do not have enough staff to provide safe, appropriate care.¹ Many of the remaining professionals and their former colleagues have endured serious assaults, leaving permanent damage not only to their physical persons but to their families and our communities as well.

The staffing crisis is dire. The 1990 Augusta Mental Health Institute (AMHI) consent decree requires one mental health worker for every six patients.² Unofficial staff accounts indicate they are handling double that number.

Additionally, we have had Augusta constituents who work at Riverview contact us over concerns that their administrators at Riverview have been resisting their efforts to organize and to create dialogue with their colleagues and state officials to ensure their safety and the best care for their patients.

Safety concerns at Maine's psychiatric facilities are not new, with a history of staff enduring permanent injuries and patients being charged with assault and being sent to correctional facilities.³ At

¹ <https://maineaficio.org/news/opinion-legislature-must-address-unsafe-staffing-levels-state-psychiatric>

² <https://clearinghouse.net/case/416/>

³ <https://maineaficio.org/news/mental-health-workers-give-powerful-testimonies-retirement-bill>

least one such case has resulted in civil action with \$100,000 in damages being awarded by the court to the plaintiff, a veteran mental health worker who was assaulted.⁴

In the 131st Legislature, legislation was introduced to ensure workers who provide direct care to people in need of mental health services receive state retirement benefits after 25 years of service, as law enforcement, firefighters and corrections officers currently do, recognizing the extreme danger of their work.⁵ The measure earned unanimous support in both the House and Senate, though it ultimately did not receive funding. Workers continue to endure inadequate staffing levels, leaving working conditions unsafe and some Mainers unable to receive in-state psychiatric care – potentially to the detriment of their recovery.⁶

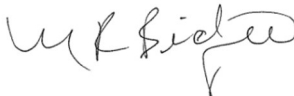
We must address unsafe staffing levels at our state psychiatric facilities. Staff need adequate protection and Mainers need local mental health facilities to provide necessary treatment. We believe it is in the best interest of the public and those working in Maine’s psychiatric facilities for the Government Oversight Committee to request that the Office of Program Evaluation and Government Accountability conduct a study on the injury rates of employees at these two facilities, which would be supplemented by a hearing to obtain testimony from psychiatric center staff regarding staff recruitment, retention and safety.

Thank you for your consideration of our request. Please let us know if we can provide additional information.

Sincerely,



Rep. Raegan F. LaRochelle
House District 59



Rep. Bill Bridgeo
House District 60

⁴ <https://www.centralmaine.com/2017/10/18/ex-riverview-patient-sued-over-assault-on-worker/>

⁵ <https://www.mainelegislature.org/LawMakerWeb/summary.asp?ID=280088903>

⁶ <https://www.pressherald.com/2024/08/10/maine-is-still-sending-psych-patients-to-controversial-south-carolina-hospital-despite-complaints/>