

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services,

My name is Darcey Boucher. I'm here testifying on my own time, and I live in Sabattus. I have worked for the Department of Health and Human Services in the Office of Family Independence for 14 years, and I currently work as an Eligibility Specialist. My role involves working with Mainers and families to determine their eligibility for benefits provided through DHHS, such as EBT, TANF, MaineCare, etc.

In my time at DHHS, I've seen the number of clients in need steadily increase each year. As more people struggle to keep up with the rising cost of housing, food, heat, medicine, childcare, and other expenses, more people are relying on Maine's social safety net and the services that we provide at DHHS. Because we are helping more people in need, caseloads have grown, which has led to stress and burnout for many staff members.

Specialists, who assist Mainers with accessing these critical benefits, are trained for roughly six months when they are first hired. But after their training, many of them will promote to a different role or simply leave the department due to the pay, large caseloads, and stress. The turnover is not sustainable and makes it harder for all of us to do our work.

If we want to keep qualified and experienced people on staff, we need to pay them more. Higher pay will help the Department with both recruitment and retention. The longer you do this work, the more experience you gain. If we were able to retain more of our staff, it would mean we could help more Mainers who are in need. It would also mean a better work/life balance for all of us, as the caseloads wouldn't be as heavy if we had more people to work them. The work that my coworkers and I do is so important to so many of our fellow Mainers; we offer stability during challenging times, a lifeline out of poverty, and a safety net for those who are down on their luck. But we need to be paid fairly for the work we do and we need to invest in making sure we retain qualified staff like myself.

Thank you for your time.