

Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Ben Freedman and I have been a career firefighter and EMT since 2008 and I am a resident of Brooksville. Currently I work in Ellsworth, previously I worked in Portland. The testimony I submit today reflects my personal views only.

I am asking you to vote LD 601 as “ought to pass.” As I am sure you are all aware the state of Emergency Medical Services in Maine is at a tipping point. There is not a singular cause of this crisis. Our labor pool, already strained by shifting demographics, was further depleted by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic as our providers burnt out, retired, or switched to other professions. Historic wage growth in other sectors made our once coveted public sector jobs less appealing to potential hires than they previously were. Vacancies that once garnered dozens of applications for a single position now go unfilled.

There are other bills that will attack the various root causes of this problem. Nearly all of them, however, will take time and money. Some of them will take a lot of both. Our crisis is now. Statewide, EMS agencies are closing on almost a monthly basis. First responders all over our state are routinely experiencing extended wait times for ambulances to be available to transport our patients. This failure is exponential: as remaining services and providers become increasingly stressed, systemic failure will accelerate. I do not make these assertions to be an alarmist. I would refer you to the hours of testimony provided to by the EMS Blue Ribbon Commission. We are not people who are predisposed to panic, but to use a common colloquialism: “It is what it is.”

LD 601 provides an opportunity for the Legislature to give us the help we need now and at no cost to taxpayers. What we need now is people. In a perfect world we could pass rules that would make our providers some combination of a SEAL Team/Peace Corps/neurosurgeon. We are not in a perfect world right now. We are, in fact, drowning. Maine EMS rules already require appropriate PPE be worn for every patient interaction to protect against the transmission of respiratory illness. The US Military has rolled back their vaccine requirements. The federal government has now formally ended their pandemic response. This is not a moment to restrict entry into our emergency services workforce.

In closing I’ll ask you to step back three years. To the beginning. When we didn’t know what this thing was and people were scared. When many people were working remotely, but we were Googling how to sterilize an N95 in a fire station oven and sleeping in our garages to stay away from our kids. I don’t take this walk down memory lane to evoke sympathy or elicit a cursory “thank you for your service.” It is to remind you that we are the helpers, but now we need your help. If there are five qualified non-vaccinated people out there, we need them. Maybe there’s even twenty, we’ll take it. Get us the help we need, pass LD 601.

Benjamin Freedman
Brooksville
LD 601

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