

May 12, 2023

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government,

I'm Ramona Welton of Augusta. I'm writing as a private citizen in support of LD 1854, An Act to Complete and Implement the Comprehensive Review of the Classification and Compensation System for Executive Branch Employees, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine.

As a process auditor in my 39th year of service with the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles, I know when things add up and when they don't.

Yet again, [strong increases in state government revenues](#) are predicted for the coming years on top of [the recently projected \\$283 million surplus](#). This follows a trend of several years of recent surpluses. While this is good news, there's a caveat: These surpluses are a direct result of the state government underpaying thousands of state workers throughout our careers. Not one but two state-commissioned reports found the state consistently lowballs pay for state workers compared with other public- and private-sector workers throughout Maine and New England.

[A 2009 report](#) documented that Maine Department of Transportation crews were underpaid by 21.6 percent; professionals like engineers and chemists, 17 percent; institutional workers, 11.8 percent; and supervisory workers, 9.6 percent. The Baldacci administration essentially responded by stamping the report "confidential" and instituting [20 unpaid state worker furlough days](#), further reducing state workers' wages.

Under the LePage administration, state workers went four years without raises and [the pensions of state workers and teachers were cut](#) to pay for tax breaks that mostly benefited Maine's wealthiest residents. LePage left hundreds of positions vacant, worsening a crisis in delivering services from plowing snow to answering 911 calls to staffing our psychiatric centers.

[Data from 2020](#) show we're paid 15 percent less than our peers in the private and public sector in Maine and across New England. For some classifications, it's worse: Accountants are underpaid by 20 percent to 33 percent; chemists, 24 percent; civil engineers, 20 percent to 25 percent; mechanics, 31 percent; and correctional officers, 16 percent.

Since then, wage growth for state workers has lagged far behind that of the average Maine worker. In 2022, Mainers saw average raises worth [8.6 percent](#), while state workers' pay increased only 4 percent. With most employers competing in a tightening labor market, the average worker saw double the nominal raises state workers did, and the pay gap continued to grow.

[State job postings](#) tell the story: Custodians, laborers, groundskeepers, park rangers and assistant rangers start at \$15 an hour; legal secretaries, \$15.85; egg and poultry inspectors, \$16.20; accounts-payable clerks, \$16.30; and accountants, \$18.94. [State commissioners](#), [environmental groups](#), [state workers](#) and their [unions](#) all say the state must address this wage problem. The

impact on services is real. One in 6 positions in state government [is vacant](#) — totaling nearly 2,100 vacancies. The reward for those who keep working for the state: forced overtime.

When you're plowing roads, answering 911 calls or working with children and families in crisis, the mental and physical exhaustion of excessive overtime runs the risk of becoming a serious public safety concern. And when the Maine Department of Environmental Protection or Maine State Ferry Service are understaffed, as they've been for years now, it affects our economy.

Currently state workers are in contract negotiations, yet the Bureau of Human Resources has [refused to meet with us](#). Given how far behind the state has fallen, it's no mystery why the state HR director doesn't want to meet with all state workers. It'd be difficult to defend this stark inequity in front of an audience of your own employees.

As one of Maine's largest employers, the state of Maine has a duty to create fair standards for workers across Maine. Instead, the state is actually applying downward pressure on wages as it competes with industries for the same pool of workers.

Some have suggested using the [supposed surplus](#) for [tax cuts for the wealthiest Mainers](#). This is offensive; the last round of income tax cuts in 2011 were paid for by dramatically cutting the retirement benefits of state workers and teachers, who don't even receive Social Security benefits.

To be clear, while neither Gov. Janet Mills nor the 131st Legislature created these issues, they have a responsibility to fix them. Please support LD 1854. Thank you.