

Testimony of Jane L. Gilbert

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

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government,
Friday, May 12, 2023, Cross Office Building Room 214 and Electronically

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government, I'm Jane Gilbert of Augusta. I have worked for the State of Maine for over 40 years under Republican, independent and Democrat administrations, with the last 25 years in managerial capacities. I speak 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.

My managerial capacities for the State of Maine have included:

- Personnel officer for the Maine State Prison;
- Labor relations specialist for the Governor's Office of Employee Relations, now known as the State Bureau of Employee Relations;
- Director of labor relations for the Department of Transportation;
- Director of human resources for the Department of Transportation;
- Deputy commissioner for the Department of Labor in which I was responsible for all labor relations with Department employees;
- Although I retired in 2009, I went back to work for the Department of Labor in 2019, again as a Deputy Commissioner;
- In the spring of 2020, I became the point person for hiring for the Department of Labor to address the demand for departmental services as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded.

Throughout my state service, I can say unequivocally that the low state employee wages, as well as the steady degradation of state employee benefits, from pensions to healthcare, have created a real recruitment and retention problem for Maine State Government. This problem has permeated all departments, and it continues unabated today.

State workers today aren't just struggling to make ends meet. They also are worried about whether they will have a secure retirement as a result of being underpaid throughout their careers. I'd like to share with you some stories of state workers, in their own words, illustrating their concerns about ever being able to retire with dignity:

"As a millennial, I do not have the luxury of the generational wealth that the generations before me enjoy - I do not have a retirement account as I had never had enough money left over after living expenses to contribute to one, I will likely never be able to purchase my own home, and I certainly would not be able to support children on my salary. The services that Maine employees provide to the people of Maine is worth so much more than the pennies that we receive in return."

--A worker in the Office of Family Independence within Maine DHHS

“The pay gap affects me personally in that my retirement will be less than it should be. I will be retiring in about 3 years, and because the state pay scale has been eroded over the past few years, the amount that I have to live on in retirement will be less than it should be.”

--A worker for Maine DHHS

“My savings account balance is the minimum of \$5 as I CANNOT SAVE MONEY ON MY STATE SALARY! In terms of other employers, in January 2023 the State of Massachusetts advertised an opening for a position doing exactly what I do now (manage hazardous waste cleanup at Dept. of Defense facilities) with a *starting* salary that is over \$15,000 more than what I make after 28 years in my current position. I'm unable to move to Massachusetts but I have considered asking if I could do that job remotely or mostly remotely. This would mean the State of Maine would lose my 28 years of institutional knowledge (the only other staff in my unit who do what I do, with experience working with Dept. of Defense, have less than two years' experience *combined*) as well as all the connections I have made over the past 10 years working with staff from other states and senior staff from the US Office of Secretary of Defense on national committees and work groups. The idea of leaving the State of Maine causes me great anxiety but as I approach retirement in less than 10 years, I simply can't afford to live on my state salary anymore.”

--A worker for Maine DEP

“While we have seen small progress in wage increases in the last couple of years. The 2 to 4% we have received does nothing to compare to the increases to the cost of living is in this state. Couple that with increases to our insurance premiums, higher deductibles, and less medical/dental and vision coverage available and how is anyone supposed to survive, yet alone try to save for our retirements?”

--A worker for Maine Revenue Services

“With the cost of living and cost of gas, (I travel 30 miles to and 30 miles back for work), I have all I can do to keep up with my bills let alone have enough money left for food. I cut corners wherever I can just to be able to buy my Kids and Grandkids birthday gifts etc. I'm 64 years old and close to retirement. If they go by your three highest pay years, I'll have to get a part-time job after I retire just to survive.”

--A worker for Maine Revenue Services

“I'm almost 74 years old, my husband is 76, and we still have to work, to help build our retirement income. Right now with the price of groceries & gas, plus everything else that is inflated, we can't retire. We have both worked for 50-plus (years) and still can't afford to retire. A pay raise would help to make that possible.”

--A worker for the Office of Family Independence within Maine DHHS

“I work in the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired in a poorly known field called Orientation and Mobility. There are only 11 positions in the whole state for this job title and our work is itinerant, covering the entire state to provide direct service (teaching and rehabilitation to people with vision impairments of all ages - birth through seniors. We have had a vacant position in our Portland office for two years (1 out of 4 positions for all of Southern Maine and we'll be down to 2 by the end of May, putting us staffed at 50%). There is a national shortage in this field and we can't even get applicants to

consider our position as our salary doesn't come even close to any other agencies in New England providing this work (with cost of living factored in.) Portland is especially suffering because of the housing and living costs being the highest in the state. We have caseload sizes well beyond any I've had in my 17 years working in this position and soon people will be waiting many months before seeing a specialist. Aside from burnout on the employee level, this will impact our clients' getting the rehab they need to return to work or maintain work which becomes a struggle with the onset of vision loss, as our work directly relates to Vocational Rehabilitation. Staff from more northern parts of the state are having to travel south to help us, with one traveling from as far North as Bangor. Without addressing our pay gap and with the rising cost of living in southern Maine, I fear our positions and any new vacancies will never be filled and that my final few years before retirement will be grueling. I question whether I will be able to remain in the position myself."

--A worker for the Maine Department of Labor

"We worry and fret that our children and grandchildren are leaving the state never to work or live here again. They do this not for wanderlust, but for financial security. Not to get rich, but to survive with a chance of saving for retirement. Daily I speak with our younger Mainer's offering positions of employment, only to hear them say they are just going to move to a different state. They see the Maine State job listings and literally laugh at the rate of pay offered. We are not able to fill all open positions because of this gap. When you can make almost as much working for fast food, including insurance, as you can working in a State job why would you?"

--A worker for the Maine Department of Labor

Please support LD 1854. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.