

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Cheryl Blyther-Guay, resident of the town of Northfield. I'm here on my own time to speak in support of LD2121.

I am an eligibility specialist for the Office of Family Independence of the Department of Health and Human Services. My job was to determine eligibility for the SNAP and MaineCare programs but for the past year been part of Quality Control. I love my job. When I was hired it was understood that it takes about a year to be fully trained. I had to learn a 3-inch binder's worth of policy for MaineCare and an additional 3-inch binder's worth of policy for the SNAP program, in addition to immigration policy as it pertains to state and federally funded programs, self-employment tax records, etc. This is not a job that just anyone can step in easily. It is a challenge to recruit and train qualified candidates to completion. Often, we lose our trainees before they even complete their full year of training, moving on to other jobs that pay more for the same type of skill set.

We are chronically understaffed statewide. It is not uncommon for individuals to call our customer service number and wait 3 to 4 hours or more to speak to an eligibility worker to apply for benefits, ask questions about their benefits, or report changes to their case. I see on a regular basis in the case record where a client will call 5 or 6 times in an attempt to complete a mandatory interview or report changes to their case only to be put on hold again for an eligibility specialist or worse yet, be told that the phone queue has reached the limit and they will have to call back, or have the phone queue shut down completely due to a high call volume. Currently eligibility staff are working an abundance of overtime to just keep up with the flood of applications and recertifications that are coming in. We cannot sustain this pace. We do not have enough workers to keep up with the workload. We are drowning and we need help. We are not attracting and retaining qualified candidates, because we are not paying anywhere near what the private sector has to offer. I would like to express the dire need on behalf of myself, my co-workers, and the residents of Maine who we serve to bridge the pay gap. I ask for your support of LD2121.