

February 6, 2024

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 2121, An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions. As a process auditor in my 40th 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 \$265 million surplus for the next two fiscal years. This follows a trend of several years of recent surpluses. While this is good news, there is 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 starting barely over \$15 an hour. There is a revolving door for state government positions, and the State of Maine ought to do more to effectively recruit and retain these workers who keep our state running.

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 still 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.

In the most recent round of in contract negotiations, the Bureau of Human Resources refused to meet with us for months. Given how far behind the state has fallen, it's no mystery why the state HR director didn'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.

It is difficult to tell people who work with you for days, weeks and years that the 6% raise we recently received will make their lives better when they have to work 2 jobs to keep their home, heat their home and feed their family. Or put another way, I paid \$3.99 this week for the same loaf of bread that in 2021 was \$2.00. Our wages aren't keeping up and haven't for years. Working for the State should not be a commitment to poverty. The very people who act as the safety net for the peoples of Maine should not be rewarded with poverty wages and then told how great they are.

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 2121. Thank you.

Ramona Welton
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