

James Bailey

Hampden, Maine

LD 2214

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Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. I'm James Bailey, a licensed social worker employed at Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center and president of the Maine Service Employee Association Local 1989 chapter that represents the hospital. I am submitting this testimony on my own time in support of additional funding to the needs of the hospital.

As many members of these committees are aware, Maine is experiencing a mental health crisis. The work my colleagues and I provide directly supports many of the most severe case examples of this treatable crisis. However, the success of our work to support these Mainers is hindered when we are not provided adequate resources. Both State psychiatric hospitals routinely accept and treat many dangerous, mentally ill individuals in the state – individuals charged with aggravated assault, arson, sex crimes, attempted murder, and murder. Some of these patients have tragically already committed heinous crimes and are sent by criminal courts to restore their competence to face their charges or regarding their sanity. Our work in providing treatment for these individuals directly influences the prevention of these types of crimes and tragedies from occurring and reoccurring.

However, our ability to provide effective treatment goes only so far as our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified, competent staff. When we have many vacancies, others are required to work overtime – sometimes forced – in order to maintain staff minimums. Staff get assigned more and more work, burnout increases, and then turnover follows – further encumbering those that remain. Standards inch lower, corners get cut. When patients have a crisis and require physical intervention, there are fewer staff available to show up. And of those that can, the average experience in safe restraint drops lower and lower. Patients get less individual attention, fewer opportunities to engage in treatment, and are forced to wait more and more. To maintain minimal staffing, the hospital runs between 70-90% capacity, leaving us unable to safely care for as many patients as we have beds. You all in this committee can help me, help my co-workers and help this vulnerable population and the public.

Improving the effectiveness and robustness of the mental health system in Maine has recently been championed in bipartisan unity. And for good reason; it is one of the pillars of a safe community. Public safety is a basic function of state government and is brought about by the people who work for the State of Maine. For every bill passed, for every program created, for every resolution made, and for every benefit enacted, it is the State of Maine workforce that makes it happen. With our current, continued chronic understaffing, the vast network that makes up a safe community will suffer without adequate resource investment.

Please support additional funding to help close state employee pay gap, which continues to leave us understaffed. Thank you for your time and consideration and feel free to follow-up with any questions you may have.