

LD 209 An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025

Neither for nor Against

January 23, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Gattine, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees.

My name is Darryl Wood, and I am the Executive Director of Life Enrichment Advancing People (LEAP, Inc.) in Farmington, Maine. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of the direct care workers in my organization and the families in our area who rely on us to take good care of their loved ones.

LEAP has been around since 1980, and I have been with the organization since 1997. We provide services in group homes, in-home support, shared living and case management, assisting well over 100 people every day.

When I started as a group home administrator, it was relatively easy to hire and retain staff to meet the needs of individuals we supported. Over the years, it has become increasingly difficult to remain competitive as rates have not kept up with expenses and the cost of living. The last 5 years we have been in a staffing crisis, closing homes, consolidating programs and unable to respond to community needs for additional services. In 2024, we took the necessary step to increase wages across the board for Direct Care Workers, to try and stem the turnover and lack of successful recruitment. This investment, while necessary, resulted in the agency losing money. We justified this deficit knowing that our services were up for rate adjustments, and we had won a hard-fought battle here in the legislature to have a mandatory COLA each January. The rate setting keeps getting pushed back and in December we learned that the COLA was not to be forthcoming. This felt like a gut punch to our people who have been through so much over the last several years.

I am currently going around to meet with each of my staffing groups. I am asking them to “hang in there” and I will be encouraging them to do some outreach to legislators in our districts. What I am hearing is stories of food insecurity, dropping health insurance, unaffordable childcare services and stress caused by the inability to make a living wage while working 40 or more hours a week. The ability to recruit and retain staff means we can take good care of the people who take care of the people and consider adding programs when families need us. All of this is contingent on getting COLA now, which was considered and implemented by this body for a reason. Thank you.

DARRYL WOOD

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