

Paul Johnson
Brunswick
LD 210

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and other members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, and Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Paul Johnson, and I am a professor at the University of Southern Maine's School of Social Work, living in Brunswick.

I am here today to testify neither for nor against the Governor's proposed budget. We appreciate the Governor's proposal to increase the state appropriation to the University of Maine System by 4% -- this is a good first step. But after years of chronic underfunding of our state's 4-year public higher education system, we implore these committees and the Legislature to dig deeper and find ways to provide additional funding to our University of Maine system and make sure these funds are targeted as close to the students as possible . . .

I have taught in the School of Social Work for 25 years. Our program is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, and we have both undergraduate and graduate programs.

During my time at the university, I have been extremely impressed with the students in the program. Many, if not all, are attending school and working full—or part-time. In addition, many have families and are juggling numerous responsibilities while also attending school.

Both our undergraduate and graduate programs are extremely rigorous. In addition to the academic requirements, students are expected to undertake a fieldwork placement. This requires students in our undergraduate program to complete 400 hours of placement, and in our master's program, students complete 400 hours in their generalist year and 500 hours in their specialist year.

Yet, despite all of these challenges, students continue to attend our program. Currently, we have over 200 students enrolled.

I have already mentioned how challenging the program is, yet what is even more impressive is the students' journeys to attending it. Many of them started at one of Maine's community colleges. Some began a four-year degree program at another university and had to withdraw due to life events. Many have worked in other occupations and decided to become social workers.

I can assure you that they are not entering the profession for its high earning potential. As I frequently state in class, in jest, " You are all taking this program because you are going to be earning a six-figure salary." The high cost of college necessitates your intervention on behalf of our students.

They understand that obtaining both undergraduate and graduate degrees in social work is necessary for career advancement. Upon finishing their college education, they expect to incur a debt burden of approximately \$50,000 in student loans.

We are here today to request additional funding for the University of Maine System, specifically to increase support for students directly.

Over the past several years, college has become unaffordable for many students. Providing financial support directly to students would be a beneficial move for the state as well.

The vast preponderance of graduates from the USM School of Social Work elect to remain in the state. Social work agencies employ these individuals, resulting in a positive contribution to the local economy in the form of state taxes. Residency and consumer spending within your districts by these individuals contribute to property tax revenue. In addition, they are residents who raise families and whose children attend schools in your districts.

This funding request offers substantial financial advantages and positive

consequences for the state of Maine. The provision of direct financial assistance to students ensures timely educational completion while alleviating the burden on student loan debt. This allows for earlier contributions to the state's financial resources.