



# HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION  
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002  
(207) 287-1440  
TTY: (207) 287-4469

## **John "Jack" E. Ducharme III**

34 Heald Street  
Madison, ME 04950  
Cell: (207) 431-0775  
Jack.Ducharme@legislature.maine.gov

### **TESTIMONY IN FAVOR OF LD 477**

#### ***An Act to Enhance Public Safety in Rural Counties by Providing State Police Patrol and Policing Services February 24, 2025***

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. I am Jack Ducharme, and I have the honor of representing the citizens of Maine House District 71 which includes the towns of Cornville, Norridgewock, and Madison in Somerset County. I am here today to introduce my bill, LD 477, An Act to Enhance Public Safety in Rural Counties by Providing State Police Patrol and Policing Services.

It is no secret that law enforcement is struggling to keep up with societal conditions in our state. The scourge of illegal drugs flowing into our state is killing our citizens, destroying our families, and threatening the peace of our neighborhoods. Since the pandemic, many towns that had their own municipal police forces decided to eliminate them due to their inability to find staff, the lack of trained and willing officers or the human need for the limited pool of trained officers to go where they can maximize their earning for their skills. Many towns have given up trying to maintain their own force and have come to rely on the County Sheriff and the State Police for policing services.

State Police, for reasons that were societal, fiscal and command decisions reduced their presence in the rural counties. The county sheriffs struggle to hire,

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train, and retain officers in the never-ending revolving door that has been the history of policing in Maine. Officers simply go to where they will be able to make the most money. No one faults them but the safety net that we used to have for small towns is gone.

As rural law enforcement presence faded, crime increased. One area that has shown a significant increase, particularly in rural counties, is the lack of available officers to do traffic patrol. The Sheriff's Department is tied up with all the "regular" policing issues, like drug enforcement, domestic violence cases, robbery and in some cases homicides. They simply do not have the time to do rural traffic patrols. In the absence of visible traffic patrol, human nature being what it is, violations of traffic law have become the norm. I am sure that there are many in this room that have experienced impatient drivers tailgating, excessive speed, people running red lights and stop signs in rural areas and other traffic infractions. As speeds increase, fatalities increase. Maine had 171 fatalities in 2024 alone. Since 2019 there have been 726 fatal crashes in Maine.

In the 131<sup>st</sup> Legislature, Maine State Police came forward with a plan in the Governor's Supplemental Budget in 2024 to add 32 troopers to the staff. Both rural and urban representatives widely supported this effort. However, at the last minute, the request was cut from 32 new troopers to 16 new troopers. The overall fiscal savings of that action were about \$3 million annually. Part of the plan for these 32 officers was to help cut down on the overtime that officers were having to work. In 2024 alone, Maine spent nearly \$8.5 million in overtime for State Police officers. Seems like we might have saved \$5.5 M by spending \$3 million earlier?

Fast forward to 2025. The officers added are making a difference in traffic patrols on the Maine Turnpike. However, the rural areas of the state still need help. Our county sheriffs are covering vast amounts of territory with limited resources. Adding additional resources to the County Sheriff department falls directly on the local property taxpayer. By adding resources to the law enforcement mix using

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the Maine State Police, we can spread the cost of that police presence over the entire tax base of the State of Maine rather than increasing local property taxes. Further, the addition of more personnel to the Maine State Police helps them cut down on overtime, allows flexibility in region coverage and in turn provides relief to the County Sheriff Department. This effort is well planned and just needs the Legislative approval to execute. I have had several conversations about how these additional officers will be deployed across the state, but I will ask the representatives of the Maine State Police to provide that detail in their testimony.

I urge you to consider this legislation. Properly staffed and implemented it will have a significant impact on policing in the rural areas of Maine that need help. I am confident in the professionalism and the integrity of both the County Sheriff's Departments and the Maine State Police to bring this plan together to benefit the people of Maine at a cost that the taxpayers of Maine can afford. If you spread the \$3.3M annual cost over the tax base of roughly 720,000 potential Maine taxpayers, the impact is less than \$5 per taxpayer. Assuming the same 51% ratio of taxpayers to population, and a population of 264,678 in the six rural counties, there are roughly 135,000 actual taxpayers. Against a \$3.3M annual cost for this effort, that equates to nearly \$25 per taxpayer in these counties, assuming that the same taxpayers are property owners. Further, with a statewide service model at the Maine State Police, there are significantly more resources at the ready should a situation arise that requires specialized attention or expertise. I view this as a win for our local taxpayers and our County Sheriff departments, especially in the rural areas.

Thank you for your time, for listening and considering this legislation. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have to the extent that I am able.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jack Ducharme", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Rep. Jack Ducharme

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