

***Testimony of Jason King, Portland PD Major in support of
LD 639, “An Act to Improve Training Opportunities for
Law Enforcement Officers,”
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
March 10, 2025***

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Jason King, and I am the Operations Major at Portland PD. I am here today to speak in support of LD 639 on behalf of the Portland Police Department.

In full disclosure, I am also a new member of the MCJA Board of Trustees, installed in November. I will stress that I am here today in my capacity as Major for PPD and am not speaking on behalf of the Board.

Portland is asking for this change because we need options. We are the second largest Police Agency in the State of Maine next to the State Police, and the largest municipal police department; we are twice the size of the second largest municipal police department. With 158 authorized sworn officers, we currently have 29 vacancies, and have hovered around 19% percent vacancies for several years. With those injured on duty, officers in training status, and long-term military leave, our actual operational vacancies are around 40 officers. That is more than two entire patrol teams for us.

Patrol shifts that should have 13-14 officers working have 7-8. We can't keep up. Portland is suffering from a surge in homelessness, drug use, and violent crime. Public safety and public order have been jeopardized by our lack of officers. In reality, 158 officers is not enough to do what we are asked to do every day.

The BLETP admission process in its current form is based off of hire date and is designed to favor reserve officers who have worked the road and the Maine State Police. The three largest municipalities in Maine: Portland, Bangor, and Lewiston, do not have reserve officers. Portland's City Code prohibits it, and any police agency that is CALEA certified also is prohibited from hiring reserve officers.

Based on the BLETP admission standards, we have had to send a Cadre to several classes to guarantee we have our seats. I currently have a Lieutenant assigned as a Cadre to ensure that 4 of our cadets were allowed entry into the current BLETP.

Over the last year and a half, Portland has not been able to seat 4 different officers in the BLETP classes they should have attended due to lack of space. These 4 officers are not able to work as Police Officers for us, which results in significant costs in overtime and backfilling.

Where some agencies may send one officer once a year or every other year to the BLETP, we need to send multiple officers every single class. In the MCJA 2023 annual report, Portland had 72% of the municipal vacancies in agencies with over 65 sworn officers. The numbers are jarring, and we need to be able to get people trained and on the street as quickly as possible.

It takes a minimum of 34 weeks to become a fully trained full time officer in Portland with the BLETP and Field Training. If we cannot send new officers to the academy due to lack of seats, those 34 weeks turn into a year.

We recognize the challenges we are facing as an agency. PPD has invested a significant amount of money and resources into a multi media recruiting campaign, while also being mindful to retain the highly qualified and experienced officers we have. For the first time in a very long time, we aren't asking ourselves "Where are the people who need jobs" but instead saying "If only we could train them". Recruiting numbers are up, and we have set a goal of double digit officers in the Fall 2025 Academy. I'm pleased to report that we are already well on the way to that number now with months to go.

I have provided all of this background information to illustrate our dire situation. We can not adequately staff our department by training 1-2 cadets per BLETP class. We need to launch forward.

We understand the gravity of what we are asking. We are not looking to replace or circumvent the Maine Criminal Justice Academy in any way. We believe in the Academy and its mission, and we believe in Director Peck, Asst. Director Ryder and the Board of Trustees. Portland PD averages teaching around 440 hours of instruction at the BLETP every year. I taught there myself last Wednesday. We are not looking for anything adversarial, we are simply asking statute to all a non-residential, off-site academy to clear backlogs and keep up with the demand on an as needed basis.

Portland hosted 3 academies many years ago so this isn't an unprecedented request. The 87th, 90th, and 95th MCBPS were held in Portland, overlapping with ongoing classes in Waterville until the transition to Vassalboro and the BLETP in 2001. Several Southern Maine police chiefs went through our classes, and PPD still has many of these officers in its ranks today.

I respectfully ask you to support LD 639. I'm happy to answer any questions. Thank you for your time today.