

**Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989**

**In Support of LD 579, An Act to Include Certain Mental Health Workers Under the 1998
Special Plan for Retirement, Sponsored by Senator Mike Tipping**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
10:30 AM Wednesday, March 12, 2025, Cross Building Room 202**

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, I'm Beth White, director of politics and legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. We are a labor union representing over 13,000 Maine workers, including workers at the Maine Department of Health and Services, which encompasses Riverview Psychiatric Center and Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center. We are here in support of LD 579.

Mental health workers and their colleagues at Dorothea Dix and Riverview do challenging and physically demanding work, often under dangerous conditions. The [vision statement](#) for Riverview states, "Riverview Psychiatric Center, in collaboration with the community, will be a center for best practice, treatment, education, and research for individuals with serious and persistent mental illness and co-occurring disorders." Workers at Dorothea Dix and Riverview often encounter mental, verbal and physical abuse while at work, and face a higher likelihood of on-the-job injuries. The patients they work with are often at risk of harming themselves or others, so workers must remain constantly aware of their surroundings to keep both themselves and their patients safe. We encourage you [to read the written testimony submitted by workers in the last legislative session](#) in support of similar legislation; they spoke the difficult nature of their work.

As many of you are aware, the 1998 Special Plan allows workers to retire at age 55 with 25 years of service. The workers eligible for this special plan do work that is high risk, stressful and often traumatic. Moving other workers doing similar jobs into the 1998 Special Plan would be an incentive to not only hire new workers, but also to retain the talented and experienced workers currently employed. It would also show thanks and appreciation to the Mainers who do these incredibly difficult jobs.

Understaffing and vacancies at our two psychiatric hospitals have been recurring problems for years, and it's past time that they are addressed. A [Bangor Daily News article](#) in 2023 reported that nearly 1 in 6 Maine state jobs are unfilled with over 2,100 vacancies at the time. These vacancies have impacted Riverview Psychiatric Center and Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center as well. The problem of understaffing due to vacancies continues to this day. According to data provided by the Executive Branch as of November 2024:

- **Riverview Psychiatric Center:** 51 positions, or 25% of the 204 MSEA-SEIU-represented permanent and limited period positions at Riverview, were vacant as of November 2024. That’s actually an improvement from April 2024 when 64 of 204 MSEA-represented positions were vacant, for a 31% vacancy rate. Because of such a high vacancy rate, staff at Riverview have been regularly forced into unsafe encounters with patients. This has frequently led to violent assaults on staff—often with life-changing consequences, including severe traumatic brain injuries.
- **Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center:** 8.5% vacancy rate for MSEA-represented permanent and limited period full-time positions as of November 2024. While this is an improvement from April 2024 when the vacancy rate was at 16%, all of these vacancies at both Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center and Riverview Psychiatric Center need to be filled immediately to ensure quality services and both staff and patient safety.

When positions remain unfilled, it not only makes work more challenging for those who remain, but for workers in these facilities it can also make their jobs more dangerous. Maintaining staffing levels is critical across all sectors of state government. Open positions have included nurses, psychiatrists, mental health workers, and psychologists, among others.

This is clearly difficult and dangerous work, yet the State has consistently fallen short when it comes to respecting, protecting and paying these workers fairly for their labor. I’d like to draw your attention to the State’s most recent [State of Maine Market Pay Report, dated Sept. 30, 2024](#), which puts the state employee pay gap at 14%. Again, this is the State’s own study. [Please also see the related memo](#) that we presented to the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee on Oct. 8, 2024, detailing our response to the State’s Market Pay Report dated Sept. 30, 2024. As you may know, on average, State employees in 2020 made 15% less than their counterparts throughout New England, even after adjusting for regional pay differences, according to the [State of Maine Market Study Report](#) dated Nov. 20, 2020, so there was only progress made of 1% in closing the pay gap between those two studies.

Fortunately LD 579 provides a path toward ensuring the recruitment and mental health workers at our state psychiatric hospitals. LD 579 adds employees of Maine DHHS employed on October 1, 2025, or hired thereafter who provide direct care to persons in need of mental health services in a community-based or residential setting or to residents or patients of mental health institutions in this State or have responsibility for providing crisis outreach and crisis services to adults with developmental disabilities or intellectual disabilities in a community-based or residential setting to the 1998 Special Plan for certain Maine Public Employees Retirement System members.

Adding these workers to the 1998 Special Plan would be a step in the right direction towards ensuring that we are giving them the respect and compensation that they deserve.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.