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**LD 784 - An Act to Require Health Insurance Coverage for Specialized Risk Screening for First Responders**

Senator Bailey, Representative Gramlich, and honorable members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services. My name is Shawn Esler, and it is a privilege to serve as the State Fire Marshal. I write **neither for nor against** LD 784.

Our first responders face operational hazards often exposing themselves to dangerous environments that increase their risk for serious medical conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and other illnesses linked to their demanding work. While my testimony will focus mostly on the fire service, that is not meant to minimize the exposure and risk to other areas of emergency services.

Specifically, the fire service is at a higher risk due to the exposure to known carcinogens found on the fire ground. Additional exposure can be linked to per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), a component of firefighting foam. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) statistics show that firefighters have both a 9% higher risk of being diagnosed with cancer and a 14% higher risk of dying from cancer than the general population.

In 2023, the fire service across Maine responded to 2,336 structure fires. The Fire Marshal's Office (FMO) responded to nearly 500 of those fires. While the FMO provides our fire investigators with limited annual testing specific to detecting cancer, most fire departments cannot afford these preventive measures. Firefighters often bear the cost of screening or co-pays out of pocket.

It is important I highlight some of the steps our State has taken to address concerns for our first responders. Recently, the Department of Public Safety released a Request for Application (RFA) to reimburse government entities the cost of providing cancer, cardiovascular, and mental health screenings. This RFA was modeled after a successful pilot program in Southern Maine that recently completed a screening where they found a cancerous tumor. That firefighter was able to receive early medical treatment. Another screening found a massive heart block and that firefighter later received open heart surgery, likely mitigating a tragedy.

This one-time funding of \$2,000,000 aims to provide all 16 counties across Maine with supplemental funding to jumpstart first responder wellness and yield results, like the examples above. I encourage the Committee to learn more about this program by visiting the website of the Office of State Procurement Services.

While LD 784 may not be feasible, I ask for your consideration in programing that improves access to preventive healthcare for our first responders.

Shawn Esler, State Fire Marshal