

Testimony to the
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
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Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the committee:

I'm Rick Schneider, President & CEO of Maine Public. I'm grateful for the opportunity to testify before you again, and regret that it has to be via Zoom this time because of my travel.

You have heard testimony about Maine Public before, and today I'll focus specifically on LD 692, "An Act to Increase Support for Statewide Emergency Broadcast Messaging." Thanks to Senator Pierce and the multiple cosponsors, including Senator Rafferty, Senator Libby, and Representative Brennan, for bringing this bill forward.

This legislation is about maintaining the investment that the State has made in a robust statewide public safety transmission system...a vital and essential resource that the State has invested in for decades.

The Legislature provides an annual appropriation to Maine Public to maintain and operate the broadcast infrastructure that covers our vast state, and that extensive transmission network exists to provide emergency public safety information as well as educational and informational programming like *Maine Calling*, High School Basketball Playoffs, *High School Quiz Show*, and state news from Maine Public journalists.

Our partnership with state government is about Maine Public's role in public safety and emergency communications. We are the only broadcast service that covers the whole state, so we are the best way that authorities can communicate statewide on short notice. Maine Public partners with the Maine Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) and serves as the backbone of the State's Emergency Alert System (EAS), broadcast on radio. On the television network, we partner with MEMA on the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system that provides geo-targeted text messages to cell phones in the event of an emergency. We also maintain a public safety datacasting network that allows broadcast delivery of large files such as building blueprints or photos during a crisis.

Per State Statute, our appropriation is intended to meet the cost of delivering broadcast and emergency alert services and maintaining the state network.

There is a brochure in the testimony packet I submitted that includes a chart of our appropriation history, so you can reference that if you like. Through FY 2012, the appropriation lined up with our audited technical expenses, as intended. But our appropriation has declined while our technical expenses have increased. In FY 24 the appropriation covered only half the technical expenses. The appropriation is roughly \$1.6 million and our technical expenses were \$3.2 million. And that gap continues to grow.

Meanwhile, Maine Public is providing far more service than in 2012.

We have upgraded our network with funding from the Maine Recovery & Jobs Plan in 2021, including two new television transmitters. These UHF transmitters provide better service and cover a wider broadcast area, but these UHF signals use more power, resulting in higher costs for electricity.

We have also expanded our radio network to cover more rural areas, with new signals licensed to Bethel, Eastport, Fort Fairfield, Fort Kent, Millinocket, and the Moosehead Lake region. Those stations were made possible by a federal grant and extend our public safety emergency capability. But those new signals will also drive up our power bills.

Our utility costs have already gone up by more than \$260,000 per year since the television network upgrades in 2023. We project that the rural radio expansion will drive them up another \$200,000 per year, starting now.

LD 692 would provide for an increase of \$350,000 to the existing baseline appropriation. Specifically, that would take the appropriation from \$1,650,000 to \$2 million. It would bring the funding back to the level of FY 2012, a dozen years ago. That would still be well below the level that the State Statute mandates.

To summarize: Maine Public is providing better, more modern future-proofed transmission, over a broader geographic area, serving rural areas where we are the only broadcaster. We are providing this service to the State for less than the amount the State was appropriating in 2012, and that amount is not adjusted for inflation.

A final note is that many public broadcasting state networks are state agencies and receive much higher levels of funding from their state. Maine Public is one of the few self-standing nonprofits that serve as the primary provider of emergency public safety messaging for their state. This is the legacy of the 1992 merger that removed public broadcasting from the University of Maine System and established the modern Maine Public as a nonprofit organization. **This is why the State appropriation for the transmission expenses of the network is so crucial for our organization, and for our State.**

Again, it is about maintaining the investment that the State has made in a robust statewide public safety transmission system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to answer any questions. And thank you for the Legislature's support of Maine Public.