

Susan Noyes
University of Southern Maine
LD 1219

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Susan Noyes and I work at the University of Southern Maine as a full professor of occupational therapy. I live in Portland, and I write today to testify in support of LD 1219, An Act to Increase State Funding for the Campuses of the University of Maine System and to Raise the Minimum Hourly Wage for Employees of the System.

In my near 20 years at USM, I have witnessed first-hand the effects of persistent underfunding of the UMaine system, particularly on students and staff. Within my own department, we have not been able to upgrade equipment or classroom/lab spaces for students' use in roughly 15 years. We are clearly falling behind other, better-resourced occupational therapy education programs in terms of what our students have access to--examples include state of the art simulation labs for learning clinical skills in a 'real' setting, and virtual Anatomy teaching tools such as Anatomage that provide a superior learning experience for this difficult course. Staff have been an egregious casualty of chronic underfunding at USM. My department has had constant turnover in our administrative specialist position over the past 6 years, and the unbelievably low pay rate (~\$19/hr) is mostly to blame. These highly qualified, mission critical, student facing staff can literally make more working at Walmart. As search committee chair for numerous staff searches, I am instructed that I cannot negotiate salary to match a potential candidate's skills or experience, but instead I am to emphasize the very good benefits offered at USM during the hiring process. It is true that the health, retirement, and tuition waiver benefits are very good, but these do not pay rent or buy groceries. Hardworking staff at USM deserve much more for their hourly pay rate than the current level at which most qualify for food stamps and other public benefits. This is unconscionable, and an embarrassment for our public university system. We must do better, and I beseech you to support LD 1219 as an investment in our current students, staff, and faculty, and by extension, the vibrant future of the state of Maine.

Sincerely,
Susan Noyes, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA
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