

Good morning, neighbors, lawmakers, and fellow Mainers,

My name is Thomas Sutherland, I'm a retired U.S. Army Sergeant First Class, 20 years of service as an infantryman—boots on the ground, leading troops through the toughest fights. As an infantryman, I learned one rule above all: study past battles, learn from their mistakes, or you're doomed to repeat them. Maine's Paid Family and Medical Leave program ignores those lessons. Forcing every taxpayer to pay for a benefit only some need is a bad plan, and with a \$2 billion deficit, it's one we can't afford. Make it optional: if you want it, you pay. If you don't, like me, you can opt-out.

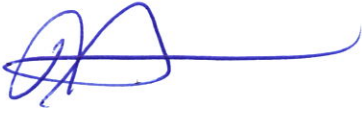
This PFML program, passed in 2023, gives 12 weeks of paid leave starting in 2026, funded by a mandatory 1% payroll tax—half from employees, up to \$880 a year. Some Mainers need this, and I respect that. But I don't. My military pension, tax-free VA disability pay for wounds earned in service, and steady job mean I'm covered for any leave. Making me pay for this is like handing me a rifle I'll never fire, it's useless to me and a waste of resources. That's not how you win a fight.

Other states' programs are our battle reports, and they're grim. California's paid leave system ran a \$20 billion deficit by 2023, bled dry by fraud and weak oversight. Connecticut's program fueled a \$3.6 billion deficit from 2022 to 2024, with claims outpacing cash. Washington State's program buries employers in costs and red tape, setting the stage for tax hikes. These states didn't learn loose rules and abuse—fake claims, stretched eligibility—torched taxpayer money. Maine's headed down the same trail.

Every taxpayer in this room needs to hear this: we're staring at a \$2 billion budget deficit for 2025-2027, with a \$10.3 billion budget already stretched thin, including \$25 million to launch PFML. Taxes started January 2025, and by 2030, this program could cost \$900 million a year—double what we expect now. If abuse or high claims hit, like in California, taxes could jump to 2%, costing you \$1,200 a year or more. Employers, especially small businesses, will raise prices or cut jobs. Taxpayers, and me—will face higher taxes or lose services like schools or roads to plug the hole. The “make everyone pay” approach isn't just unfair; it's like charging into battle with a flawed plan. As an infantryman, I'd never let my squad do that.

Here's the fix: make PFML optional or let people opt out who can prove they don't need it, like the self-employed who opt in. Want the benefit? You pay the full tax—employee and employer shares. Don't need it? You're exempt. My pension and VA benefits, earned through blood and sweat, make PFML irrelevant for me. Let me show you documentation for my pension and VA disability, and let me opt out. This is fair and practical. It cuts waste, curbs abuse and protects our budget.

I'm not here to kill PFML. If it helps a family, fine. But don't draft every Mainer into paying for it. In the infantry, we adapt to the ground truth. With \$2 billion at stake and taxes set to climb, let's learn from other states' failures. Make PFML a choice: pay for it if you want it. Honor my service, protect our taxpayers, and fight smart for Maine. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'T' and 'S' followed by a long horizontal line.

Thomas Sutherland

Sergeant First Class, US Army (Ret)