

**TESTIMONY before the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public
Safety**

Regarding LD 852

“An Act to Reduce the Property Tax Burden by Adequately Funding County Jail
Operations”

SUPPORT

Apr 28, 2025

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and distinguished members of the committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety: my name is Travis Kennedy. I'm the Director of Public Affairs for Cumberland County government, and I'm here to speak on behalf of the County regarding LD 852.

I appreciate the thorough testimony provided by the Maine County Commissioners Association, and I can testify that Cumberland County struggles with the increased costs and complexities of operating a jail, and those expenses - sometimes driven by mandates from the state - are outpacing our ability to pay for them. I don't seek to repeat all of the MCCA's points. While all counties are different, I can confirm that many of the struggles highlighted there are universal.

Instead, I thought it might be helpful to focus on one specific challenge with some depth, to highlight just how deep these fractures run - and why more support from the state is essential to staving off the crisis. It's the biggest line item in the County Jail budget: staffing.

The County budget accounts for 97 correctional officers in order to fully staff the position, and as of Friday we have about 30 vacancies - meaning that we are currently operating with about two-thirds of required staff for this position.

Now, whether we have 97 employees on payroll to fill every shift is irrelevant - in order to operate a safe facility, we need employees covering every required shift. So existing employees have to pick up the slack. They're working double shifts, oftentimes maxing out their allowable working hours each week - and all on overtime, at a much higher cost-per-shift to the County. We can't leave a shift open. Somebody has to work it. **So having fewer employees on staff than budgeted actually costs the County MORE money, not less.**

And this isn't just costing the County more money. It's putting an unsustainable burden on the employees. Holdovers - meaning a single shift that unexpectedly turns into a mandatory second shift as well - put a huge strain on these employees. They cannot take vacations and don't get enough time to rest and recharge. This drives burnout, and turnover.

It's a death spiral - being understaffed puts so much strain on existing employees that they leave their job - and that just increases the pressure on the employees who remain.

But the problem is worse than that - because this budget isn't really reflective of the changing needs of the jail. In 2019, there were 128 budgeted correctional officers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the County and law enforcement went to great lengths to temporarily reduce the number of people incarcerated. With jail numbers down, Cumberland County was able to consolidate the number of shifts in the jail and reduce the number of budgeted officers to the current 97.

But those days are over. The population of the jail has been steadily increasing, meaning that we need more officers to cover these shifts. Our staffing needs have increased, and they will continue to do so. We need more positions, and they are going to be expensive to fill. As you can imagine, safely staffing the jail is **only going to get more costly** in the months and years to come.

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But failing to solve this crisis will only be more expensive - and maintaining a flat funding level as costs rise effectively reduces the state's contribution to jail operations. We hope you'll see fit to align more closely with the 20 percent contribution that this body has agreed was worthy in the past.

Thank you for your time today, and for your consideration of this very important issue. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.