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LD 2212

Good morning Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is James Bailey, a social worker at Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center in Bangor and a member of MSEA-SEIU. I'm speaking on behalf of myself today supporting the funding for LD759, An Act to Include Certain Mental Health Workers Under the 1998 Special Plan for Retirement.

I looked through the committee members' legislative profiles to see which careers you have or had. I saw a banker, an attorney, social workers, real estate agents, and scientist. Please take a moment to consider what one of the worst days in your job felt like, when the worst thing that could have happened, happened.

A few weeks ago, a patient threw a sheet over a nurse's head then attempted to strangle them with their shirt. Every week I have a meeting with all of the patients at the hospital who plead not criminally responsible due to insanity, and the relative risk I have is minor compared to nurses, acuity specialists, and others who spend all their time on the units with the patients. Over the past several years, the number of patients at the hospital ordered there by criminal courts has more-or-less tripled. The same individuals who are in jail are in the state hospitals, but without the interventions that corrections are able to use, no guarantee that we can effectively treat them, and sometimes without a serious mental illness.

The system is strained and the work is dangerous. Some staff have worked there so long that they are permanently in a state of alertness and can be startled by loud noises or sudden movement. In my time at the hospital, I have seen a nurse get a traumatic brain injury and end her career and an acuity specialist break his shoulder and effectively end his career. There are a handful of staff that can never work directly with the patients on the units again because of injuries that they suffered. Patients will use their bodily fluids as weapons against staff - some because they are profoundly ill and some because they want to make others suffer.

It took 34 years and tens of millions of dollars to resolve the AMHI Consent Decree. Washington State was recently fined \$400 million dollars due to their failure to provide timely mental health services for criminal defendants. Many other states are currently in litigation around similar issues.

Don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish; psychiatric hospital work is difficult and dangerous, and we need to encourage people that are willing to work there jobs with commensurate pay and benefits to retain them. Since the executive feels that we are only worth about 85 cents on the dollar, I hope you can see the short term and long term wisdom in investing in the workforce who support some of the most difficult and dangerous individuals in the state.