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2254897Members of the Transportation and Appropriations & Financial Affairs Committees. My name is Kris Ladue, and I am a Contract Grant Specialist for the Department of Transportation. I am also the VP of the Transportation Chapter of MSEA-SEIU. I am speaking to you today, on personal time, to address the Pay Gap for State of Maine employees, and how it affects my department, my coworkers, and myself. I am requesting these committees work to use the state government surplus to undo the 2025 personal services budget attrition rates. The increase in the attrition rates took away \$68 million from accounts that ought to be used for paying state workers fair wages (\$56 million from the General Fund, \$12.3 million from the highway budget).

I work for Contract Procurement office that processes the contracts for all programs under DOT. This includes Bridge (which is my program), Multi-Modal, Highway, Maintenance and Operations, Freight and Passenger Services, Project Development, and Planning. Due to the many programs, we have under the CPO umbrella, the workload is heavy, and to stay afloat, we need a complete team to address the needs of DOT.

When I first started three years ago, we were down multiple people, and the workload was intense. My coworkers were balancing not only their own tasks, but the tasks of the vacancies as well. This workload resulted in the implementation of overtime, capped at five hours a week, for straight or comp time. This led to stress, exhaustion, and burnout for myself and my team. Nevertheless, we carried on, and I am proud to say that my crew are the hardest and most resourceful coworkers I ever had the privilege to work with, which dispel the stereotype of state workers. In fact, these perceptions are the exact opposite state employees' realities, since we all are understaffed, overworked, and underpaid.

One of the largest struggles for my department is hiring and retention. Although we now receive a steady number of applicants now due to the current job market, this was not always the case. I believe this was due to the low pay rates at the starting steps of our classification. When we hired new folks, a few that left us within a couple of years. Another struggle is retirement. In the last three years, we lost 6 people in a team that is fully staffed with 10 individuals. It is a process to get new people in the door for the long term, and it is a waste of time and resources to train someone that is gone within the year.

I ask the legislative body today to consider the experience of the state worker in today's world. We are, first and foremost, civil servants, and we deserve to be compensated for our labor at a just rate. With our health insurances premiums rising and inflation, we will be working just to struggle and make ends meet, and I don't believe that is fair nor a sustainable model for the State. I see my coworkers leaving all the time for the private sector, and I honestly do not blame them. My hope is that this legislature will finally address the pay gap so the State can retain its talent, thus offering a good work/life balance and a happy and effect workforce. We are exhausted, we are undercompensated, and we are struggling, but we show up for the people of the great state of Maine. We just ask for fairness and to reap the fruits of our labor.

Thank you for your time and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Kris Ladue