

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs; Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Nickole Wesley. I am a Judicial Branch employee here on my own time to speak in support of LD 258, the biennial budget. I have been with the Judicial Branch for thirteen years, starting out as an Assistant Clerk in Portland and currently work in the Administrative Office of the Courts as the Communication Access Specialist managing the Branch's interpreter program. I am also the President of the Judicial Chapter of the Maine Service Employees Association Local 1989. Those roles have afforded me the opportunity to speak to employees all over the state and learn about the many struggles they face on a daily basis.

Clerks from Springvale to Houlton, and beyond have been working overtime to keep up with the volume of work. One clerk I talked to had worked until 11 p.m. the previous evening and was in at 7:00 a.m. the following morning to try and get as much done during the quiet hours as possible. Another clerk was on her tenth consecutive day of work, working full days on the weekends. One court had a notebook full of all of the overtime hours each employee has worked since June 2022 and the pages were full. A clerk at one location just two weeks ago told me "it's a good day if someone doesn't cry."

When I worked as a clerk I had the occasional difficult customer or customer presenting with mental health problems. That has dramatically changed over the last couple years. Court employees are not prepared or equipped to deal with such things yet they do it to the best of their ability and often remarkably everyday. As one would expect this has resulted in massive employee burnout that caused many experienced employees to seek other, less stressful and more flexible options. That has taken a toll on the employees that have stayed, some offices were severely understaffed to a point that courts had to occasionally close. Despite all of that the general public and many that interact with the court system expect "business as usual" and the employees are doing their absolute best to provide that, but it's getting harder to sustain the longer things

continue the way they are. Relying on overtime to run an entire branch of government is not sustainable. Employees have had to take time off for their own mental health and many who wished they could and just kept going anyway because the work needed to be done.

All of these struggles also extend to employees in the Branch that work in support services like court operations, court access, and technology as well as administrative services like finance. They all care immensely about the work they do and recognize the significance that the court system plays in the lives of Maine citizens. They take that responsibility seriously and work hard every day to keep the justice system moving. All the Judicial Branch employees I've talked to are exhausted and doing the best they can with what they have. Increasing positions and funding to make other improvements so the hard-working employees of the Maine Judicial Branch can continue to facilitate justice is not an unreasonable request and is ultimately in the best interest of Maine people. I urge you to please vote yes on LD 258 and approve the Judicial Branch's biennial budget request. Thank you for your time.