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I come here today to speak on the behalf of myself and not as a representative of any state agency. I am here to share my story and that of others who may be similarly impacted.

My name is Shawn Welch. In 1990 at the age of 21 years old I was hired by the Maine Department of Corrections. I looked at this opportunity as a career, and a future with security. It had been instilled on to me at a young age that a career with health benefits and a retirement were elements of being successful and living a comfortable life.

In my tenure with the Maine Department of Corrections I took advantage of the many opportunities that were presented to me. I have taken pride in my work and I feel accomplished and have been successful in the roles I have filled, thus making a positive impact upon the agency, my supervisors, my co-workers, and lastly myself.

At 21 years old when I began my career, the age a person could retire was 62 years old after 25 years of service. At 21 one that seemed like a lifetime away.

Little did I know that when I entered the profession the average life expectancy of a Corrections Officer was only 59 years old as compared to the national average of 75 years old.¹ Additionally individuals working in the field of corrections live for approximately only 18 months after they retire.

According to the American Addiction Center Corrections Officers have the highest rates of mortality, divorce, alcoholism and domestic violence when compared to any other occupations.

A study conducted by the New Jersey Police taskforce found that the suicide rates of Corrections officers are twice as high as other members of law enforcement and the general public.

The Center of Mindfulness in Corrections has found Corrections staff when on duty are in a constant state of hyper-vigilance. In this state of hyper-arousal, the body is flooded with adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol – a primary cause of chronic stress related health risks.²

One article from the Guardian found that 34% of Corrections Officer suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. That is double the rate of Police Officers and the General Public.

¹ Desert Waters report adds that on a national average many COs live only 18 months after they retire as their life expectancy age is 59 compared to 75 for the national average.

² Noradrenaline functions as a stress hormone when it is secreted into the blood stream, as it increases the heart rate especially to cause increased blood supply to skeletal muscles. In addition, noradrenaline triggers the release of glucose from the energy stores of the body to extract a high amount of ATP from cellular respiration.

I can say that I have personally experienced the hardships of having to work extra shifts due to lack of staffing, being called into work for emergency's, having to work nights, weekends, holidays, been threatened, been sued by residents and have been subjected to public ridicule. Although these examples can be summed up as "it's a hazard of the job", it negatively impacts family and loved ones who did not sign up for the task.

I have personally had a close friend commit suicide as a result of the stressors he encountered with employment with the Department of Corrections. During a training exercise a friend and team member collapse and I performed CPR on him until he was taken away by ambulance. This individual unfortunately passed away on his way to the hospital. He was only 56 years old.

I speak before you today to bring attention to Bill #LD483. In the year 2000 the retirement age for newly hired Corrections Officers was changed. An individual hired after 2000 was eligible for full retirement upon completing 25 years of service at 55 years of age. This change resulted in Corrections Officer hired prior to 2000 being covered under two retirement plans. One plan being the 25/62 and one being the 25/55. This resulted in Corrections staff covered under the two plans having their portion of their retirement under the 25/62 plan being penalized 6% a year for every year they retired under the age of 62. In 2021 the Legislature and appropriations passed a bill that absorbed all Corrections Officers covered under the AFSCME Union bargaining agreement into the 25/55 retirement plan, thus eliminating any penalty of those who retire prior to 62 years of age.

In 2021 the House and Senate passed the same bill for Corrections Supervisors covered under the MSEA Union bargaining agreement. Although this bill passed the House/Senate, it was not funded in appropriations.

Using myself as an example. I am 54 years old. I presently have 32 years of state service in the Department of Corrections. When I turn 55 years old, I will have 33 years of service. 23 years of those years will be under the 25/55 plan. Under this plan one is required to have 25 years of service and the minimum age is 55. I will not meet the requirements without obtaining a penalty. I will have to work until 57 years of age to not be penalized with 35 total years of service.

At 57 years of age I will have had 10 years of service under the 25/62 plan. These ten years of service will be penalized I believe at 6% per year, for each year under the age of 62. This being said if I want to retire from state service with no penalty I will be required to work until 62 years of age with a total of 40 years of service. This seems a little extreme.

Personally I am not considering retirement at any time in the near future but this is something that weighs heavily when considering the future. I have turned down promotional opportunities due to the circumstances surrounding the retirement and even inquired about demoting to an AFSCME position prior to retiring in hopes my retirement will not be penalized.

I know I am not the only individual working for the Department of Corrections that is affected by the current state of the retirement plan, so I ask for myself and everyone who is impacted by this, that you please consider Bill #LD483 for passage and funding.

I sincerely and respectfully appreciate your time.