

Testimony of Jeff McCabe
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989

**In Support of LD 1761, An Act to Include Certain Mental Health Workers Under the 1998
Special Plan for Retirement, Sponsored by Senate President Troy Jackson**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing
1 PM Wednesday, May 3, 2023, Cross Building Room 202

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, I'm Jeff McCabe, director of politics and legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. We are a labor union representing over 13,000 Maine workers, including workers at both Riverview Psychiatric Center and Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center. We are here in support of LD 1761 and ask you to ensure it covers all mental health workers and workers who are interacting with patient populations.

Mental health workers and their colleagues at Dorothea Dix and Riverview do challenging and physically demanding work, often under dangerous conditions. As stated in job descriptions, "Riverview Psychiatric Center, in collaboration with the community, is a center for best practice, treatment, education and research, for individuals with serious, persistent mental illness, and co-occurring substance use disorders." These workers often encounter mental, verbal, and physical abuse while at work, and face a higher likelihood of on-the-job injuries. The patients they work with are often at risk of harming themselves or others, so workers must remain constantly aware of their surroundings to keep both themselves and their patients safe. We encourage you to read the written testimony submitted by workers who can speak more to the difficult nature of their work.

As many of you are aware, the 1998 Special Plan allows workers to retire at age 55 with 25 years of service. The workers eligible for this special plan do work that is high risk, stressful, and often traumatic. Moving other workers doing similar jobs into the 1998 Special Plan would be an incentive to not only hire new workers, but also to retain the talented and experienced workers currently employed. It would also show thanks and appreciation to the Mainers who do these incredibly difficult jobs.

A recent Bangor Daily News article reported that nearly 1 in 6 Maine state jobs are unfilled, that's just over 2,100 vacancies. These vacancies have impacted Riverview Psychiatric Center and Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center as well, there are currently eleven openings listed on the Maine gov website for Riverview alone. When these positions remain unfilled, it not only makes work more challenging for those who remain, but for workers in these facilities it can also make their jobs more dangerous. Maintaining staffing levels is critical across all sectors of state government. The open positions include nurses, psychiatrists, mental health workers, and psychologists, among others.

This is clearly difficult and dangerous work, yet the State has consistently fallen short when it comes to respecting, protecting and paying these workers fairly for their labor. As you may know, on average, State employees make 15% less than their counterparts throughout New England, even after adjusting for regional pay differences, according to the State of Maine Market Study Report dated Nov 20, 2020. Adding these workers to the 1998 Special Plan would be a step in the right direction towards ensuring that we are giving them the respect and compensation that they deserve.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.