

Hello, my name is Thomas Smith, and I am a Maine State Employee. I am a social worker in the Portland Office of Child and Family Services. Lip service is constantly paid to us child protective workers, telling us how important our jobs are. But when it comes to paying our workers what they are worth, we are met with shrugs and silence. Low pay proportionate to the cost of living in this field affects us negatively in countless ways. I was asked by fellow Maine employees on how the pay gap affects me as a state employee. I fear running into my clients on my off time because we both are forced to shop at the same low-cost grocery store. I stock up on bologna sandwiches at the dollar store, knowing it may be my only meal eaten while at work, and will probably be eaten while driving all over. It was not always this way in Portland. As I am sure Representative Skold and Senator Chipman can attest, a working-class citizen used to be able to reasonably live and work in Maine's largest city. Before Portland became a playground for millionaires, the cost of living was not extreme, and state employees could live where they worked, because rent was cheap, and homes were affordable. Social workers who live close by like me, pay over half of their month's salary in rent alone and those that can afford homes are forced to buy where their salary allows them. These workers can live up to an hour or more away from their home offices and this directly impacts how often caseworkers see their clients. Social Workers in this state are some of the most dedicated people I have had the honor of working with. They sacrifice their own time, their own money, and their physical and mental health to make sure the children they serve are taken care of. A common expression heard in helping professions like ours is "We do it for the outcome, not for the income." This phrase is dangerous and is probably never told to those in the private sector, so why do we say it to our public employees? It tells our workers to sacrifice themselves for the job. Jobs that are becoming increasingly hard to fill and retain. Because it's a hard and thankless job, people will resign as quickly as they are hired, searching for greener pastures and bigger paychecks. When we cannot retain our state employees, every part of daily life for a Mainer is affected. Our Lewiston office alone has over 20 vacant positions. Do you realistically think that that office can do their jobs well with that many vacancies? Children are not seen as quickly when they share their worker with 20 other families. A snowplow driver calls in sick and roads aren't cleared quickly for people who need to travel. A ferry pilot retiring means one less driver of a boat, delaying the ferry schedule. I know that our state's biggest economy is in tourism and our visiting population is very important. However, there are Maine people who live and work for our state the whole year and they are struggling. I believe that we can do better. We must do better. With your support of this bill and ending the pay gap for state employees, we can hold up Maine as a shining example to the nation of how a state can support its workers. People who visit and see this, will want to live here. Maine is known as Vacationland. Let's help our workers whose daily life is anything but a vacation.

Committee, Thank you for your time and for your consideration of LD-1854.