

## LD 197 - Written Testimony

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To: Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, Members of the Labor Committee:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee today. My name is Brandi Caron, I am employed by the Maine State Police Crime Laboratory as a Forensic DNA Analyst, and I am here on my own time.

In 2019, a group of Scientists and Analysts from the Crime Laboratory and Computer Crimes Units testified on LD 1355, a bill for a special retirement plan. This was very emotional testimony, which involved sharing specific details of our day-to-day work and the various types of cases we encounter. It was difficult to deliver and to hear. It was traumatic to witness the impact that learning about our jobs had on the legislative committee members and the community members who were present in the committee session that afternoon. The bill passed, but there was still work to do and more testimony on additional bills LD 1101 and then LD 1808 was necessary. These bills have all passed unchallenged.

When we met with members of our union and MainePERS to discuss the retirement plan as it had passed, we were shocked to realize that for most of us with 10 or more years of service, opting into the early retirement program would penalize or negatively impact us financially. We would automatically become part of a split plan; meaning we would have to satisfy retirement criteria (age and years of service) for both plans. By opting in, to the new plan, we would have to contribute an extra 1% towards our retirement, which is reasonable, however the original retirement contributions would not transfer to the new retirement program. Depending on when a person started working, the normal retirement age of 62 or 65, would result in a 42% to 60% penalty to the original retirement benefit. The new special plan would also be penalized because some would reach age 55 prior to working the full 25 years under that plan, resulting in a percentage of penalization for that as well. It is a great option to any new employees however, there was no clear benefit to existing employees with more than 5 years of service.

When this endeavor was initially proposed, it was our intent to obtain the same 25-year retirement that our sworn counterparts had. Theirs is a straight 25-year retirement with no age requirement.

We are part of the first generation of civilian (non-sworn) Forensic Scientists/Analysts to do these jobs. Our jobs were originally filled by sworn law enforcement officers who were assigned to the Crime Laboratory and already had a 20 or 25-year retirement plan as part of their employment contract. In 1984, the State of Maine hired its first civilian scientist. Over the course of the last 39 years, numerous other scientists, approximately 40 people, have been hired and trained, and over half of them (23 scientists) have left the lab within their first 5 to 15 years of service. Only 2 scientists have reached retirement age and years of service within the last 39 yrs. We have had a revolving door of employees who pass the background checks, polygraph tests, and the rigorous training which requires other trained scientists to set casework aside to train the new people, who then leave all too soon.

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While employee retention is a significant driving force in this endeavor, equally concerning is the overall safety and mental well-being of employees. There is a reason why people leave. Some people can emotionally endure more than others and I can speak for myself where I have had several occasions over the last 20 years where I didn't think I could sit through another homicide meeting or see another child, beaten or raped. This work is a depleting, never ending battle. Both the mental fatigue from extreme stress and the cumulative effects of exposure to direct and vicarious traumas present significant emotional hazards for the people in this line of work. Special pension plans are designed for persons employed in jobs that place them in various special-risk classifications and to compensate employees for lasting physical or mental damage. Ten years seems to be a common breaking point. So many of our good scientists have left around that time. I think a 25-year goal would have kept them and their valuable experience at the lab.

A straight 25-year retirement like our sworn counterparts gives our civilian scientists a goal to work towards. It is a sense of accomplishment and sense of completion for the difficult, emotionally challenging, and stressful work that we do. It is a definitive mark of achievement and a means of compensation for the traumas that we will forever carry with us. These cases don't go away. Even after leaving employment, we are called back to testify and meet on unsolved cases or appeals.

I ask that we make this right and that a straight 25-year retirement benefit be granted and funded for the dedicated civilian members of the Crime Lab and Computer Crimes Units.

Thank you and I welcome any questions.