

Maine Labor Group on Health

Testimony of Maine Labor Group on Health in Support of LD 1794, "An Act to Enhance the Predictability of Mandated Overtime for Pulp or Paper Manufacturing Facility Employees"

Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

May 18, 2023

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Lisa Miller from Somerville. I am a retired philanthropy official and also a former legislator (122nd to 124th legislatures). I speak today as Board Chair of the Maine Labor Group on Health (MLGH) in support of LD 1794. The MLGH is a 44-year-old organization that trains Maine's working people about health and safety in the workplace and advocates for working people within the health care system and the Legislature.

I also represent the public health community on the Board and bring that research and data-based perspective to the work of the Maine Labor Group on Health. I'm sorry to say that, in 2021, Maine reclaimed its #1 ranking as the state with the highest rate of workplace injuries and illnesses in the country (Maine Public, 2/15/23). Maine's injury rate was 4.7 cases per 100 full-time workers, while the national average for accidents is 2.8 per 100 full-time workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Some say that Maine is just getting better at reporting injuries, but we don't really know.

Why risk going even further down the workplace injury path with forced overtime? Some of the most common reported injuries are overexertion on the job followed by slips, trips, or falls. It's not hard to imagine that those injuries could easily result from exhaustion or inattentiveness on an 18-hour shift in a mill, especially if it's the second or third day of such long shifts.

In fact, there is a growing body of research around the dangers of fatigue and sleep deprivation in the workplace, some noting that impaired workplace performance is equivalent to that resulting from alcohol consumption. Think about impaired performance and safety issues in paper mills where some workers deal with chemicals and large machinery. And then these lengthy work schedules are followed by a substantial drive home at night, resulting in a public safety risk. Long haul truckers have mandated work limits—11 hours driving and 14 hours on duty—why not paper mill workers?

MLGH understands the current labor shortage problems and the apparent difficulty of recruiting workers for highly technical jobs in mills but the solution is not to overwork current employees, putting them, their mill colleagues, and the general public at risk. I urge you to vote in favor of LD 1794.