



Solutions for a  
Toxic-Free Tomorrow

Testimony of Sarah Woodbury, Vice President of Programs and Policy, Defend Our Health  
In Support of LD 2121 "An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions"  
Before the Committee on State and Local Government  
February 8, 2024

Hello Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, and members of the Committee on State and Local Government. My name is Sarah Woodbury. I am the Vice President for Programs and Policy at Defend Our Health. Defend Our Health's mission is to make sure that everyone has equal access to safe food and drinking water, healthy homes, and products that are toxic-free and climate friendly. I am here to testify in support of LD 2121 "An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions".

Recent studies done by the state have shown that our state workers are paid on average about 15% less than the private sector and their counterparts in other states. The state has about 2100 vacant positions. This means that 1 in 6 state positions are vacant. We have been underpaying and understaffing our state agencies for years and the Maine people pay the price.

Defend works closely with colleagues in the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry (DACF), and other agencies so we have seen firsthand the struggles the agencies face when it comes to hiring and keeping staff to provide the vital services that our state agencies perform to help make sure the government functions for all Mainers. The agencies continue to lose staff to the private sector and other states that pay a higher salary.

In 2020, the 130<sup>th</sup> legislature passed legislation to require the state to test all farms for PFAS where sludge had been spread. Funding was allocated for several new positions within the DEP to help run the program and provide testing of the farms. The DEP consistently had open positions for those positions. They would hire someone, and that person would last a few months before finding a different job that paid more money, generally in the private sector. There was also funding allocated for an additional person within their safer chemicals program. They had to post the job more than once and go through several rounds of interviews before finding a candidate that was willing to work for lower wages than what they would be paid in the private sector. Additionally, this program only has 2 staff members to manage all the programs required by statute. In comparison, Washington state has 20 staff members dedicated to this program. This has hindered the DEP's ability to do the work required under the safer chemicals program including delays in rulemaking. In addition, the Bureau of Pesticide control under DACF lost their only toxicologist to the state of Vermont, which provides better salaries for its state employees.



With over 30,000 employees, the state is the largest employer in Maine. In order to be competitive with other states and attract workers and young people to the state, we need to make sure that state agency jobs pay a fair and competitive wage. State benefits no longer make up for the lower salaries that government employees generally make. The state needs to step up and adjust the salaries of its workers to keep Maine competitive. LD 2121 will help do that. We urge the committee to vote "ought to pass" on LD 2121.