

***Testimony of Executive Director Paul Gaspar before the Joint Standing Committee on
Criminal Justice and Public Safety***

Monday January 29th, 2024

***LD 2094 "Resolve, to Require the Establishment of a Stakeholder Group to
Examine and Improve the Recruitment, Retention and Wellness of Law
Enforcement Officers"***

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Paul Gaspar and I am a resident of South Portland.

I speak before you today in both my capacity as the Executive Director of the Maine Association of Police (MAP) and our membership of approximately 900 full time, municipal police officers and public safety dispatchers throughout the state, as well as a founding partner of the Maine Law Enforcement Coalition (MLEC).

The Coalition, along with its partners; the Maine State Law Enforcement and Troopers Associations, as well as the Maine Lodge of Fraternal Order of Police, represents over 90% of the full time certified, state, municipal and county law enforcement officers throughout the state.

Today, it's in these capacities that I speak in support of *LD 2904 "Resolve, to Require the Establishment of a Stakeholder Group to Examine and Improve the Recruitment, Retention and Wellness of Law Enforcement Officers"*

We are grateful to be able to bring this important bill forward and thank Senate President Jackson as well as its co-sponsors for supporting this bill of such a critical matter affecting law enforcement first responders. This bill will provide the opportunity for an honest, collective and holistic assessment of the cumulative effect of a range of issues affecting not only Maine law enforcement officers, but the families and loved ones that bear the brunt of their oaths to duty as well.

This, and many previous legislatures, have heard and voted on many efforts taken to improve the health, wellness and overall working conditions of state and local law enforcement officers as well as all first responders. Separately, they have met with some success and much opposition, kicking the can down the road due to competing bills vying for consideration, fiscal concerns and party divisions.

Following an incredible wave of anti-police sentiment both at the public and political levels throughout the country and Maine in the wake of police involved incidents in Missouri and Minnesota, the men and women of Maine law enforcement have borne the burden of these although having no connection or correlation to them. In the vacuum of a national narrative and the constant 24-hour news and social media vitriolic cycle exacted an incredible toll on officers, regardless of their efforts, relationships in their communities and their families.

This consistent and convenient onslaught, forced many officers to take stock of their safety as well as the safety of their families when considering whether their commitment was worth the sacrifice of both. This along with many other factors over the past decade has brought us to the results we see today. Resignations, increased rates of timely retirements, and cratering application rates have not only hindered the effectiveness of Maine law enforcement efforts, but also created vacancies of approximately 300 or more across state, county and municipal agencies. Agencies that have always been a small community when it was at a healthy level of approximately 2800 certified law enforcement officers.

The result of this phenomenon is that committed officers have been forced to respond to growing numbers of incidents of crime and violence, incredible demands in the face of reduced staffing, consistent reviews of budget budgets, inability to access non-mandatory training as well as abject fatigue, these have all taken a long and palpable toll on the health and wellness of officers and their families.

Law enforcement officers already experience higher rates of health issues then the average of both men and women nationally and have a life expectancy of approximately 7 years following their retirement. In a frightening new phenomenon, law enforcement suicides outnumber officers killed in the line of duty across our country. Irregular shift work, the effects of continual stress and its production of cortisol bring all the effects of anxiety, fear, depression and over time, this places offices in situations in which they may not be operating at their full abilities and then must fear the potential onslaught of weeks of public outrage should they make a controversial decision to act in the wake of this reduced capacity.

This issue has become very much a "tail wagging the dog" situation that cannot with no single issue, whether they be wages, working conditions or officer wellness that can singularly fix the global issue.

Unless there is a concerted and holistic view from stakeholders, providers, legislators and those serving on the line as we speak, we will continue to see the significant and irreversible impact to the public safety of Maine and every single citizen within it.

Quite simply, without this effort and the flexibility to work cooperatively and with commitment, each one of these segments affecting recruitment, retention, but most importantly, officer wellness, singularly will have a catastrophic effect on all others.

On behalf of the MLEC and MAP, I would urge and hope for the committee to vote "Ought to Pass".

Thank You for your time and I will be happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,



Paul D. Gaspar
Executive Director
Maine Association of Police
Maine Law Enforcement Coalition.