

**Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989**

**On LD 2214, An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025" (Emergency) (Governor's Bill)
Sponsored by Representative Melanie Sachs**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs and
the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
2pm Tuesday, February 27, 2024, State House Room 228 and Electronically**

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs and members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, I'm Beth White, Director of Politics & Legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. We are a labor union representing over 13,000 Maine workers, including workers in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

First, we support all proposed reclassifications, reorganizations, and range changes that appear in the proposed supplemental budget, some of which are outside of MSEA bargaining units. We also support the creation of new positions within DHHS, which is chronically understaffed in numerous areas. These positions should help to relieve the incredibly large workloads many workers are handling currently.

Across state government, we are facing severe recruitment and retention challenges due to the state employee pay gap. These issues are significant within our state mental health care facilities. Mental health workers and their colleagues at the Dorothea Dix and Riverview psychiatric centers do challenging and physically demanding work, often under dangerous conditions. These frontline workers are on the ground providing care for Mainers experiencing severe mental health crises. As stated in the job descriptions for Riverview, "Riverview Psychiatric Center, in collaboration with the community, is a center for best practice, treatment, education, and research, for individuals with serious, persistent mental illness, and co-occurring substance use disorders." These workers often encounter mental, verbal and physical abuse while at work, and face a higher likelihood of on-the-job injuries. The patients they work with are often at risk of harming themselves or others, so workers must remain constantly aware of their surroundings to keep both themselves and their patients safe.

When the State cannot fully staff Riverview and Dorothea Dix due to low pay, they are forced to rely on expensive contractors, such as travel nurses, to fill gaps in staffing. Our members at Riverview estimate that during the day shift, approximately 25% of nurses on staff are travel nurses; for the night shift, it's closer to approximately 90%. These

Committees may want to ask the Department for more detailed information about the use of contractors like travel nurses, and for further details around the cost of this labor. Rather than continuing to use expensive contracted labor, that funding could be used to increase wages to recruit and retain qualified permanent staff.

In addition to raising wages and closing the state employee pay gap, one piece of legislation currently on the Special Appropriations Table that would help address recruitment and retention issues at Riverview and Dorothea Dix specifically is LD 1761, An Act to Include Certain Mental health Workers Under the 1998 Special Plan for Retirement, sponsored by Senate President Troy Jackson. This legislation, which is on the Special Appropriations Table pending funding, would move mental health workers and other workers interacting with patient populations into the 1998 Special Plan for retirement. The 1998 Special Plan allows workers to retire at age 55 with 25 years of service; the workers eligible for this special plan do work that is high risk, high stress, and often traumatic. Moving workers at Dorothea Dix and Riverview into the 1998 Special Plan would not only be an incentive to hire new workers, but it would also help retain the talented and experienced workers currently employed. Please include funding for LD 1761 in the supplemental budget to not only recruit & retain staff, but also to show thanks and appreciation for the Mainers who do these incredibly difficult jobs.

While we support all proposed reclassifications and reorganizations in the proposed budget, it is important to note that the current classification and compensation system for state employees was put in place in the late 1970's. When the system was created, the Legislature also included in state law a requirement for the Bureau of Human Resources to provide active reviews, management and oversight of the entire compensation and classification system every 10 years. Each subsequent administration has failed to do this basic maintenance, and both state workers and Mainers who count on state services are paying the price for their intransigence. Not only is our classification system outdated, but DHHS workers are impacted by the state employee pay gap and are paid far less than their private and public sector counterparts. In 2019, the State contracted with Segal Consulting to conduct a classification and compensation study. The compensation study was designed by a joint labor-management committee and utilized a sampling of "benchmark" positions to determine the average compensation of state government positions. The compensation portion of the study was completed in 2020. It showed state workers were underpaid 15% on average compared to their public and private sector counterparts throughout Maine and New England. Unless the state employee pay gap is addressed, it will continue to be a challenge to recruit and retain qualified workers; that's why we support LD 2121, An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing in Maine State Government, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine, to proceed as emergency legislation. LD 2121 would:

- Provide \$165 million in funding for a new compensation and classification system that closes the state employee pay gap for Executive Branch workers;

- Require the administration to report annually to the Maine Legislature on all Executive Branch job vacancies, so that the Legislature can adequately assess the ongoing staffing crisis;
- Improve laws relating to recruitment and retention adjustments, making it easier to establish recruitment and retention programs targeting agencies experiencing chronic understaffing;
- Require the Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services and the Bureau of Human Resources to develop a plan to improve the state government hiring process

We want to point out that Department of Health and Human Services workers are buried in work, and while we support the reclasses, reorganizations, and range changes in the proposed supplemental budget, they are simply not enough. We need a new classification and compensation system to truly address the root issues with the current system, rather than making small-scale changes every budget cycle.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.