

Testimony in Support of LD 137, SP 73: An Act to Expand the 1998 Special Retirement Plan to Include Employees Who Work for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner

February 12th, 2025

Honorable Chairs' Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and Members of the Committee on Labor,

My name is Meghan Cookson, and I serve as a Medicolegal Death Investigator for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner. I am here today to express my strong support for LD 137, SP 73, An Act to Expand the 1998 Special Retirement Plan to Include Employees Who Work for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner.

As a Medicolegal Death Investigator, my work involves responding to and investigating sudden, suspicious, or unexplained deaths. We collaborate closely with law enforcement and other medical professionals to determine cause and manner of death. This work is often emotionally and physically demanding and requires a great deal of expertise in forensic science, law enforcement procedures, and investigative skills.

However, this profession comes with its own unique set of challenges, which can take a toll on one's physical and mental health. The nature of the work is stressful, and the demands on our staff are great, as we routinely deal with traumatic scenes, tragic losses, and distressing situations. While we dedicate ourselves fully to the service of the state, the psychological and physical toll is undeniable. There are certain cases that come home with you, no matter how hard you try to leave them at the door. Like seeing the remains of a friend whose body was so badly burned they had to be identified via DNA, getting the phone call that a family friend's remains were found after being missing at sea for a month and then attending the funeral days later, the psychosomatic feeling of maggots crawling all over you after examining a badly decomposed individual, or the faces of children whose lives were taken too soon flashing into your mind just before you fall asleep at night. Maine is a big yet little state; we are a part of the communities that we serve.

The 1998 Special Retirement Plan was originally designed to acknowledge the unique challenges and risks faced by certain state employees, such as those working in law enforcement and other positions where individuals are exposed to hazardous conditions. Expanding this plan to include the employees of the Office of Chief Medical Examiner is a critical step in recognizing the sacrifices made by our team. We, too, face dangerous and stressful situations, often under challenging conditions, and the current retirement benefits do not adequately reflect the demands and risks inherent in our work.

Including employees of the Office of Chief Medical Examiner in this plan would not only recognize the extraordinary contributions of our office but also help to ensure that those of us who have dedicated ourselves to public service and the investigation of deaths receive the retirement benefits that acknowledge the difficult nature of our work.

I urge you to support LD 137, SP 73, as it represents an important recognition of the work we do at the Office of Chief Medical Examiner and the need for equitable retirement benefits for all employees engaged in this critical public service.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Meghan Cookson

Meghan Cookson, M.S., MLDI