

LD 137 – An Act to Expand the 1998 Special Retirement Plan to Include Employees who Work for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and members of the committee,

I am Lindsey Chasteen, the Office Administrator for the Office of Chief Medical Examiner (OCME). I am testifying in favor of LD 137, a request to include the OCME in Maine's 1998 Special Retirement Plan. I have been at the OCME for nine years, 10 months, and seven days, but who's counting? In my time at the OCME we have investigated 35,600 reports of death.

Within these death investigations we've worked on every age group: babies, toddlers, teenagers, young adults, and older adults. We've seen everything from a baby missing their head from a shotgun because of a custody dispute, to an elderly woman who died in her sleep, and everything in between. The average person might only see a dead body at a funeral. When the person is cleaned, dressed, and made to look as though they are sleeping. It's how society wants us to remember the person; as they looked in life.

We aren't given those last, peaceful images. We're given the images of the person as they were when they died: hanging from a beam, twisted in what remains of a car, crumbled onto themselves where they collapsed. Our job is to listen, listen to their death stories, and listen to their bodies speak to us through their injuries, and their toxicology. It is also our job to listen to the people left behind. The people who come into the office to pick up their loved one's personal belongings. The people who yell at us between their sobs because we don't have the answers they want to hear. While we listen, we hold space for the grieving. We sit in silence while they collect themselves, we assure them there is no reason to apologize for crying, we look into their eyes as they tear up and steady their voice to ask the next question. If you've never unzipped a body bag while parents stand in scared anticipation of what they are about to see, or handed a photo of dead man's face to his father while he breaks down, you can't understand what it means to hold space for the grieving like we do.

Our office, all 12 of us, choose to serve our communities this way. We are dedicated, and keep showing up. We show up for the dead, the families, and each other. Repeatedly showing up takes its toll. I've had four staff end up in the hospital with suspected heart attacks, that doctors said were panic attacks. I've had staff seek counseling and been asked to find a different therapist because what they were sharing was too traumatic for the therapist. I've participated in peer support groups and watched the non-OCME participants express shock and disbelief at what the OCME staff shared. We don't share with outsiders often because people recoil, and look at us in disgust. Hearing it from someone who worked the death is too personal; people want to hear it on a documentary, safely removed from the reality of the death. We joke we're all trauma-bonded, when we know it's the truth.

I've been told not to talk about the Lewiston shooting; that people stop listening when they hear it mentioned, but I need you all to listen. My office, my team, my friends worked that incident with professionalism, efficiency, and the utmost respect for the victims. We worked for days, through a weekend, to ensure families did not have to wait to get their loved ones out of our custody. I struggled during those days, and have struggled since. But during those days I couldn't reconcile why this incident affected me the way it was. We handle death every day, why was this different? It was actually my husband who helped me the most. As a combat veteran whose battalion was the first to enter Iraq in 2003 he has seen some horrible things. Standing in our kitchen, my husband listened while I cried and asked him why I wasn't able to handle this incident like I do any other day. We handle an average of 15 deaths a day, wasn't this the same thing we do every day? His answer helped me understand I wasn't weak, and this wasn't normal. "It's the volume all at once". Maine changed that day, and I can say with certainty, my team changed that day. Even through that, my team continued to show up. Maine is lucky to have such dedicated employees.

Our partners, Maine State Police, the Crime Lab, and Computer Crimes to name a few, are all on the 1998 Special Retirement Plan. This is an acknowledgement that their jobs are more stressful and damaging to the mental state of the employees. We are seeking the same acknowledgement, that handling the traumatic deaths of Maine citizens and visitors is not like other state jobs, and is psychologically stressful. No matter the outcome, my team will continue to care for Maine's dead, and their families to the best of our ability. We don't do it because of some loyalty to state government. We do it for you, your neighbors, friends, and families. But mostly, we do it for each other because no else understands the toll it takes on us.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lindsey Chasteen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lindsey Chasteen, MBA
Office Administrator