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## **Testimony of the Maine Municipal Association**

### **In Support For**

*LD 723 – An Act Requiring the Maine Criminal Justice Academy to Develop a Nonresidential Basic Law Enforcement Training Program*

March 10, 2025

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Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Rebecca Graham, and I am submitting testimony in support for LD 723, at the direction of MMA's Legislative Policy Committee (LPC) which has chosen to make this bill part of their platform agenda for the 132<sup>nd</sup> Legislative Session.

This bill does not require the Maine Criminal Justice Academy (MCJA) to give up a residential model of instruction. Quite the opposite, this bill directs the board to make an additional non-residential model, as it has in the past, with the existing or even expanded curriculum, which can be a hybrid non-residential model with a residential component or an entirely off campus model with a deadline of 2027, based on several key points.

**Fairness.** The residential requirement is not essential for effective law enforcement training, as proven by current MCJA practices. Out-of-state applicants with comparable training can bypass the residential academy if they meet Maine's certification standards — but Maine residents are denied that same flexibility. Moreover, the idea that residential housing improves learning outcomes is outdated. Cadet bonding and teamwork are developed through shared learning, not shared sleeping arrangements.

The current training no longer includes regimented dormitory activities like waking cadets early for drills — so residential life does not contribute to core learning, is reduces the commute to receive and deliver it. If Maine accepts non-residential training from other states without compromising standards, it's inconsistent to claim that Maine-based cadets must reside in dormitories to meet those same standards. What matters is the curriculum and quality of instruction, not where cadets sleep.

**Municipal Budget Subsidy & Hidden Costs.** The Maine Criminal Justice Academy has been chronically underfunded and staffed for decades, while the duties and obligations for permanent staff are continually expanded by the legislature. The current training delivery model hides the true cost for its provision because it relies on volunteer instruction while starving the organizational structure from resources needed to be innovative and responsive in curriculum delivery. Starving the organizational structure of necessary curriculum development and coordination resources results in an imbalance in response to the needs of shared stakeholders. This bill represents the voice of those whose contribution and costs are hidden.

MCJA has been chronically underfunded and understaffed for decades, even as legislative mandates and duties have expanded. The current residential-only model conceals the true cost of training because it depends heavily on volunteer instructors, while municipalities foot the bill through local property taxes. In 2021 alone, municipalities provided an estimated \$453,088 in donated payroll to

MCJA's instructional delivery — a conservative figure that does not account for shift coverage and overtime for officers pulled to instruct, travel and hourly cost calculated in the commute to the location.

The true cost is likely to be over \$1 million per year. By establishing the deadline in this bill, it makes certain that future administrations and legislatures invest in the resource adequately to achieve the goals that cannot make it into a budget proposal without the political will to recognize the need for investment.

When the Legislature focuses only on MCJA's state budget and position counts, it ignores the enormous tax burden shifted onto municipalities — and strangles MCJA's capacity to modernize training. Continuing to rely on volunteerism without proper investment undervalues the work of these instructors and weakens Maine's law enforcement training system because there is no capacity to pivot to forward thinking curriculum review.

**Alignment with MCJA Identified Goals.** This bill provides a way to align with MCJA's Strategic Plan. MCJA's recent strategic study identified key areas for improvement that require political will to advance. The report highlighted several areas that require investment, and a small portion of the need was provided in the Governor's budget. The main areas for improvement are:

- Staffing shortages and chronic underfunding that make it a challenge to seek other revenue sources like federal grants.
- The need to increase full-time staff and better support volunteer instructors, which increased reimbursements only in part aid.
- Updating curriculum to incorporate modern adult learning principles that requires staff time and resources to broaden partnerships.
- Expanding access to training beyond Vassalboro that not only aids southern Maine communities but also expands the ability for qualified officers across the state to become instructors.

This bill aligns directly with those goals by:

- Providing an opportunity to relieve pressure on overfilled residential classes — which are only getting larger.
- Opening doors for geographically distant communities to provide board led qualified instruction, especially in southern Maine, to recruit and train locally.
- Expanding the instructor pool by reducing travel barriers that prevent qualified officers from serving as instructors based on local ability to fund their participation and travel to Vassalboro.
- Giving MCJA leadership resources and room to focus on future-focused, industry-leading training, rather than managing the logistics of oversized classes and continual mandates for more legislatively prescribed training.

As noted in the MCJA Strategic plan study:

“Training coordinators have competing priorities that detract from curriculum development; there is opportunity to incorporate more adult-based learning principles in the classroom.”<sup>1</sup> This bill asks you to make sure they are funded and placed in budgets and initiatives going forward.

**Strengthening Public Safety, Recruitment, and Retention.** Creating a non-residential option would enhance recruitment, especially for communities struggling to fill vacancies. It would lower the cost and logistical hurdles for agencies to send officers to the Academy, making careers in law enforcement more accessible and helping to stabilize staffing statewide, without the need to import candidates to quickly fill vacancies.

This bill is not a rejection of residential training, but an expansion of options to address fairness, cost efficiency, and the need for a modern, flexible training system. It recognizes that public safety training is a statewide obligation, not something to be subsidized indefinitely by local property taxpayers and should be adequately resourced and led by the current board of professionals overseeing the work now.

It’s time to give MCJA and Maine’s law enforcement community the tools and flexibility needed to meet today’s challenges — and build a system that works for all of Maine’s communities, not just those who can afford move to Maine and are able to stay for 18 weeks in Vassalboro. Officials ask that you invest in Maine’s communities and training with this statewide view and support LD 723.

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<sup>1</sup> MCJA Final Strategic Plan, Slalom, 2023, p. 36 available at:  
<https://www.maine.gov/dps/sites/maine.gov.dps/files/inline-files/MCJA%20Final%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf>