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THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

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**Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety on
LD 726, An Act to Protect Municipalities' Investment in Law Enforcement
Officers**

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Good afternoon, Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am proud to be a cosponsor of LD 726, "An Act to Protect Municipalities' Investment in Law Enforcement Officers."

Representative Boyer brought this bill forward to address a very serious issue that is severely affecting our small towns in Maine. Due to this problem, I actually have introduced a similar bill, which has not yet been printed, to address this issue as well. My approach is a halfway jump between current statute and Rep. Boyer's proposal.

As you all know, law enforcement departments across the state are struggling to recruit new officers. Departments of all sizes are hurting but the hardship is felt more by the smaller agencies because they have fewer individuals to make up the difference. Wealthier or bigger municipalities are able to "poach" officers from smaller communities by promising bigger salaries and better working hours.

Just last summer, the Mexico Board of Selectmen voted to shut down the town's police department, which was down to two officers. The decision was not made because of finances but because of the recruitment crisis. According to Chief Hodsdon, a 27-year veteran of the force, the department had seen officers resign to seek jobs with other departments that wouldn't require overtime or offered higher salaries. Some of the communities in my district are facing similar challenges and are at risk of closing or facing significant shortages.

This is because, under current statute, there is no significant penalty on departments who poach other police officers even when their Maine Criminal Justice Academy training was paid for by another town. Currently, when a full-time law enforcement officer, whose training was paid for by another department, takes a job with another force, that second force must reimburse the first department for five years in the following schedule: 100% for the first year, 80% for the second year, 60% for the third year, 40% for the fourth year, and 20% for the fifth year.

This is wholly inadequate and must be increased. One of my municipalities, Mechanic Falls, ran the numbers and learned they are losing more than \$6,000 on each officer who finds work with another department. On top of the expenses, the current structure does not account for all of the hard work and time that goes into recruiting and bringing on someone

new or the effect on morale that losing the new officer causes on the rest of the force. Given the lack of punishment for poaching, bigger departments would rather pay the penalty and gain a needed officer than go understaffed. In the last year, Mechanic Falls lost four new officers within months of graduating from the Maine Criminal Justice Academy.

I understand that law enforcement agencies across the state are desperate for trained officers. We can't blame other departments for using whatever tools they have to fill their ranks but it shouldn't be at the cost of other departments.

The departments who lose under the current system are left dangerously undermanned. And ultimately, when departments are forced to close or officers are stretched too thin, the real loser in this situation will be the constituents of districts like mine.

Thank you for your consideration of this bill. I urge you to reconsider the reimbursement of training costs for law enforcement officers.