

Testimony of Beth White

Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989

**In Support of LD 681, An Act Regarding Public Higher Education Funding in the State,
Sponsored by Senator Nicole Grohoski**

**Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, April 3, 2025, 1 PM,
Cross Office Building Room 208, and Electronically**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I'm Beth White, director of politics and legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. The Maine Service Employees Association represents over 13,000 workers across the state, including workers for the Maine Maritime Academy (MMA).

We're here today in support of LD 681 to help ensure that MMA is adequately funded and staffed. LD 681 would, beginning in fiscal year 2025-26 and each fiscal year thereafter, increase the percentage of MMA's total state appropriation as a share of its total operating costs by 5% until the percentage of the MMA's total state appropriation as a share of the academy's total operating costs equals at least the lesser of the percentages of the University of Maine System's and the Maine Community College System's total state appropriation as a share of each respective system's total operating costs. While work on the next two-year State budget is continuing, we believe it's especially important to pass LD 681 given that the continuing services budget signed into law March 21 by Governor Mills flat-funds MMA's operations budget.

At MMA, we're proud to represent the faculty, staff, support, professional and supervisory workers. They are an integral part of training the next generation of Maine mariners. As Maine's special-purpose college, MMA acts as a STEM college offering degrees in engineering, oceanography and logistics, among others. MMA is one of only six state maritime academies in the nation. MMA is an incredible asset for our state, due in no small part to the workers who dedicate their time and energy to making sure students can thrive and succeed. So, it's a real problem that wages for staff at MMA have not kept up with the cost of living over the last few years, as the low wages have caused serious recruitment and retention challenges. Ensuring that MMA workers are compensated fairly for their important work will not only help with recruitment and retention of staff but also will mean students can continue receiving the high-quality education that MMA is known for.

The staff and faculty on the campus at MMA are an integral part of training the next generation of Maine mariners. While our Great State of Maine has made good progress in making postsecondary education affordable for students enrolled in the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, the reality is that chronic underfunding of MMA for

years has left it in a situation where it must make up an undue share of its base operating budget that similar institutions count on their states to pick up.

As of 2023, MMA received roughly 23% of its operational budget from State funding, which compares to an average of 40%-plus in State funding enjoyed by its peer institutions in Maine. This funding disparity means that MMA must make up the gap through a myriad of ways that inevitably result in raising tuition, limiting programming and minimizing labor costs to the detriment of both enrolled students and those employed by MMA.

Equitably funding MMA means ensuring success on campus for students and faculty alike, and doing so will put Maine Maritime Academy in a strong position going forward. We were encouraged in 2023 to see \$2 million added to MMA's base operations budget in each year of the last biennium, as well as the 4.5% baseline increase made available to all institutions of higher education. Those meaningful investments in the MMA are one step toward closing the funding disparity. We appreciate the Mills administration and the 131st Legislature for recognizing the importance of beginning to narrow that funding gap. However, there remains much more to be done. Passing and enacting LD 681 would be another step in the right direction, so we respectfully ask you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 681. We look forward to partnering with Maine Maritime Academy, members of this committee and the Legislature as a whole to ensure that MMA students and workers can count on MMA being fully funded from now on. Thank you and I would be glad to answer any questions.