

Testimony of Jonathan French, P.E. in Support of LD 1539 An Act to Create a State Employee Compensation Stabilization Fund

Senator Baldacci, Representative Salisbury and members of the Committee on State and Local Government, my name is Jonathan French, I live in Hallowell and I am a licensed professional civil engineer in Maine. In two weeks, I will have completed 27 years in state government, with almost 24 of those years at the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT). I currently serve as the Engineering Data Manager for the Bureau of Project Development, and I've been in that position for over four years. I am here on my own time today to testify in strong support of LD 1539 because it's become clear to me that the ability of the state government to perform quality and cost-effective work for the people of Maine is in serious jeopardy if action is not taken to increase the retention and recruitment of its workforce.

As a second-generation state employee and public servant, I had already seen the value of public service from my parents when I decided to work for the State of Maine. My father worked for over 50 years for the Department of Health and Human Services while my mother taught for over 40 years in the Augusta school system. However, public service has been continuously targeted and de-valued to the point where the positions themselves are no longer seen as preferred employment options. At this point, I still plan on serving in state government until my retirement, but I have already outlasted all my former colleagues who first started work for the Department when I did, as well as many employees who were hired over a decade after. They are all now working for the private sector or in other public sector jobs outside of state government. The idea of a career state employee, like my father, is increasingly becoming a rarity.

When I left my position as a transportation engineer for the Bureau's Highway Program in September of 2020 to serve in the position I have now, I was the most experienced designer in a production role and had almost 20 years of experience in designing projects. The senior designer overseeing my work had over 20 years of experience. Now, the most experienced designer in production has less than five years of experience and the senior designer overseeing their work has just over seven. Most of the designers on the two remaining internal teams in the Program have been hired in the last few years. Retirements and promotions to supervisory and management positions like mine have occurred to create that turnover, but there have been many employees leaving for other employers as well.

Some employees have left for municipal or federal positions, while the majority have left for the private sector. This means that taxpayer dollars have been used, and are now

still potentially being used to train employees for private sector companies. However, in that situation, in order to continue to produce work, the Department not only has to attempt to hire a new employee and invest in more training for them to fill the vacancy left behind, but also has to hire the company that recruited the former state worker to do the work. In some cases the company will also have that former employee do the same exact project work that they were doing before, only now under a contract and for a significant profit for that company at taxpayer expense. I've been constantly reminded of this, as I've seen these former state employees in multiple meetings I've had with consultant firms to explain how to set up our CADD software and file sharing so they can do contracted work for the Department.

MaineDOT has also needed to contract with firms employing retired state workers to fill the employee shortage. While I enjoy seeing their familiar faces back in the office, and I am happy for them that they have been able to take advantage of the Department's needs as well as being willing to come back to do the work, it just simply isn't sustainable nor efficient to continue to rely on those companies who hire retired workers for the purposes of obtaining state contracts.

So it's now time to ask the question: what do we want the state government workforce to look like in the decade ahead? Do we want our state government to continue to be a training ground for the private sector, and use taxpayer dollars to develop employees for companies who will use them to profit from state contracts at taxpayer expense? Do we want to erode the state workforce to the point where we are totally reliant on the private sector to deliver state services at whatever profit margin they desire? I would hope the answers to these questions would be "no."

The alternative is attempting to retain a core workforce with the competency and skills that are needed to provide quality public services and protect that investment that taxpayers have made in the current state workforce. LD 1539 will give the State the ability to make that attempt by providing a compensation stabilization fund to provide the necessary funds to increase state employee salaries to provide parity between the salaries of state employees and the salaries of comparable positions in the public and private sectors based on market pay studies.

The State of Maine has to have competitive wages to recruit qualified workers and it has to maintain that competitiveness in order to retain them. Therefore, I strongly urge the members of the Committee to vote "ought to pass" for LD 1539, as well as for LD 1265 and LD 1744 that are also having public hearings today. Please give the State of Maine the means it needs to retain and recruit a state government workforce that can consistently provide quality and cost-effective services for the public good.