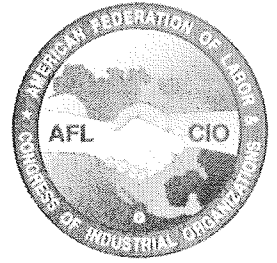


MAINE AFL-CIO

A Union of Unions Standing for Maine Workers
21 Gabriel Drive, Augusta, Maine 04330



(207) 622-9675
Visit our website: www.maineaflcio.org

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Cynthia Phinney

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Testimony of Maine AFL-CIO Executive Director, Matt Schlobohm, in Support of LD 1956, "An Act to Amend the Law Governing the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program and Establish the Community Workforce Connections Program"

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Labor Committee, my name is Matt Schlobohm. I'm the Executive Director of the Maine AFL-CIO. We represent 40,000 working people in the state of Maine. We work to improve the lives and working conditions of our members and all working people. We testify in support of LD 1956.

Our support for this legislation is rooted in three core arguments:

1. Maine has workforce and demographic challenges that will persist in the coming decades and we need creative strategies and an all-hands-on deck approach to most effectively address these challenges.
2. We strongly believe in a peer-to-peer model of support for workers. For more than two decades we've supported the state's peer support program for displaced workers, utilized during large layoffs or plant closures, and more recently we've been involved with the Peer Workforce Navigator Program. In both instances the model has proved highly impactful in supporting workers.
3. The Competitive Skills Scholarship Program is a great program to support Mainers getting into high demand, high paying jobs. We support the provisions in the bill to strengthen CSSP.

Maine's Workforce Challenges

We are all very familiar with Maine's workforce and demographic challenges:

- We are one of the oldest states in the country.
- Over the past 20 years, the number of Mainers in the workforce has increased below national averages
- The Maine Department of Labor projects the workforce will shrink by tens of thousands of people compared to pre-pandemic levels over the next decade largely due to our aging population and baby boomers retiring.

All of this will present challenges to Maine's economy and it means that we need to do everything that we can to connect workers to good jobs and tap into people's skills. LD 1956 will help us do that.

Peer to Peer Models of Worker Support

We strongly support peer to peer models of worker support as a key means to support workers getting the services and supports that we need and to support state government in being maximally impactful. We first engaged in this model of support during the many plant closings in the 1990s and early 2000s

For many years we had a staff person at the Maine AFL-CIO who worked very closely with the Maine Department of Labor's Rapid Response team assisting laid off workers with unemployment insurance, healthcare coverage, and job training supports after plant closures and layoffs. As part of that project, in partnership with MDOL, we hired, trained and supervised over 130 peer support workers – laid off workers from the impacted facility who were recognized leaders in the workplace and trusted by their peers – to work with their co-workers to help people land on their feet after a mass layoff or closure. We did this in union and non-union workplaces. Peer support workers helped people access unemployment benefits, figure out health insurance coverage, put together a resume, access job training programs, get into other jobs, navigate Trade Adjustment Assistance supports, and much more.

Over the years, this included hiring peer support workers around layoffs and closures at the Carleton Woolen Mill, Bridgton Knitting Mill, Eastern Fine Paper, Great Northern Paper (East Millinocket & Millinocket), Sappi Westbrook, Westpoint Stevens, Sherman Lumber, Fraser Paper, Georgia Pacific/Old Town, Lincoln Pulp & Paper (twice), the Bucksport mill, numerous shoe shops and many more facilities.

Having trusted peers, with deep knowledge of their co-workers, help other laid off workers made a huge difference in getting people access to needed supports and job retraining programs. Some peer support workers could get someone the mental help they needed to save their life. Some times they just needed to help someone who was 58 and had worked in the mill their whole life fill out a new resume or believe in themselves that they could go back to school to become an X-ray technician. We did this work very closely with the State's Department of Labor and it was positive and impactful.

This experience informed our work on the more recent Peer Workforce Navigator pilot program over the last couple years. This project grew out of supporting workers to access unemployment insurance, other supports and accessing good jobs during the pandemic. During that chaotic time period we helped thousands of workers navigate the system, connect directly with MDOL or other services needed and helped the system work better for all involved.

The Peer Workforce Navigator project, like hiring peer support workers during large scale layoffs, has been similarly transformative. As one small part of this project, we've established a Postal Jobs Bootcamp that provides orientation and application support to workers to access good quality jobs in the Postal Service. We worked with USPS local management and the Postal Unions to organize cohorts of individuals interested in employment opportunities with the USPS. We did a half day orientation providing very detailed information – often from workers themselves about the jobs, pay, benefits, etc - and a tour of the Scarborough Postal Distribution Center. We would then immediately help people with the online application and provide ongoing support throughout the application process, which by all

accounts is challenging, technologically difficult and confusing. This has resulted in dozens of people getting into good jobs with Postal Service which has been transformative for the workers involved and helped a bit with short staffing at USPS.

The Peer Workforce Navigator program has connected workers all over the state with good jobs. It's also been very helpful with our pre-apprenticeship cohorts including helping pre-apprentices access CSSP for ongoing training that they will receive.

We support the provisions in this bill to create the Community Workforce Connections program and provide ongoing funding for that program.

Strengthening CSSP

We have long supported the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP) as a great resource to provide workers with supports to access training for in demand, high paying jobs. I think of the story of a Sheetmetal worker I know who was looking for a career transition. His finances were very tight and he couldn't imagine a pathway to going back to school for retraining. CSSP helped him afford to go to community college for a machinist degree and he landed a good job at BIW where he still works. That wouldn't have been possible without CSSP and that story is true for hundreds of other Maine workers.

We support the proposed changes in the bill to update and simplify the CSSP application process, encourage the use of CSSP cohorts and support more workers in accessing CSSP.

For all these reasons, we strongly hope you will support LD 1956 and we look forward to working with you on it.