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LD 2081- An Act to Provide Health Care Cost Reimbursement for Retired Law Enforcement Canines

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Shawn Esler, and I am honored to serve as Maine's State Fire Marshal.

I am here today to testify in **support of LD 2081**, a bill that reflects the real-world experience of agencies that rely on law enforcement K-9s and the reality faced by handlers once those dogs retire. For the State Fire Marshal's Office, this issue is personal.

Our office has operated an accelerant detection K-9 program since 1991 and we currently have three active labrador retrievers. However, today we are here to discuss our retired K-9s (Harry and Deacon) who previously served the State of Maine in that capacity. Together, they supported hundreds of fire and arson investigations across Maine and the Northeast, working alongside local, state, and federal partners on complex cases.

Throughout their careers, Harry and Deacon were deployed to fire scenes to locate ignitable liquids, allowing investigators to pinpoint evidence, confirm laboratory results, and strengthen criminal prosecutions. Beyond investigative work, both dogs contributed to federal training efforts, fire prevention education, school visits, and extensive community outreach, participating in hundreds of public demonstrations and events statewide. These dogs have become the face of our agency and are considered an essential part of our operations.

Currently both K-9s are retired after years of active law enforcement service and now face the reality of age-related and service-related medical needs like mobility issues, cancer, and lung problems that require ongoing veterinary care. These issues are exacerbated, likely because of lifelong exposure to carcinogens found at every fire scene. Once a K-9 retires, those medical costs are no longer covered by the State or agency. Despite years of public service, financial responsibility shifts entirely to the handler, both of whom are still actively serving our office.

LD 2081 addresses this gap in a responsible and measured way. It establishes a Retired Law Enforcement K-9 Health Care Fund with clear eligibility criteria, defined reimbursable expenses, and a reasonable lifetime cap, with additional reimbursement decisions subject to the discretion and approval of the agency head or chief. This is not an open-ended benefit, it is a targeted, accountable program that recognizes the service these animals provide while maintaining appropriate oversight.

From my perspective, this bill supports responsible stewardship of a specialized public safety resource, helps with recruitment and retention of K-9 handlers, and sends a clear message that Maine values service beyond the end of active duty.

I understand the state budget constraints and concerns around spending. From a fiscal standpoint, I would support a zero-dollar fiscal note simply to establish a statutory pathway for reimbursement. Creating the framework does not require appropriation, but it allows flexibility for future funding through philanthropic organizations, fundraising efforts, court-ordered restitution, and contributions from individual departments when operating budgets allow. This approach ensures fiscal restraint while still providing a transparent and accountable mechanism to support retired law enforcement K-9s only when resources are available.

While LD 2081 contains expanded language to include other State law enforcement departments, this is a real problem facing the Fire Marshal's Office. Therefore, I respectfully urge the Committee to support LD 2081.

Thank you, and I would be happy to answer any questions.



Shawn Esler, State Fire Marshal