

Testimony of Beth White
Maine Service Employees Association, SEIU Local 1989
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs
and the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services
1pm Tuesday, February 17, 2026, State House Room 228 and Electronically

On LD 2212, An Act Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027" (Emergency) (Governor's Bill), sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations Committee, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, members of Health and Human Services Committee, I'm Beth White, Director of Politics and Legislation for the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. We are a labor union representing over 13,000 Maine workers, including workers at the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as in all three branches of Maine State Government.

We're here today to testify neither for nor against LD 2212, the Governor's proposed Supplemental Budget, and to make recommendations for a fair supplemental budget that ensures quality public services for all Maine people and provides state workers with the respect they have earned but long been denied.

We support the creation of new positions within the Office of MaineCare Services to increase staffing related to required training and compliance due to the federal H.R.1 bill. We also support the numerous reclassifications and reorganizations in this section of the budget. However, we're extremely disappointed that LD 2212 fails to make any progress in closing the well-documented state employee pay gap – the difference between what workers in Maine State Government make compared to their peers in the public and private sectors. We respectfully call on you to do the right thing and include funding in LD 2212 to help close the pay gap.

As you all know, the 132nd Maine Legislature and the Mills administration in 2025 diverted \$56 million away from the Salary Plan, which pays wages of Maine State Government workers, and used that money for other priorities. This raid on the Salary Plan wasn't a one-time occurrence. Throughout the entirety of the Mills administration, the Maine Legislature has diverted money away from the Salary Plan under the veil of raising the attrition rate for state workers, as well as allocating funds from vacancy savings for capital improvements. Members of MSEA-SEIU Local 1989 who work for the Executive Branch of Maine State Government have had enough of hearing that there is no funding to solve the persistent recruitment and retention challenges or to address the state employee pay gap, while at the same time seeing the funding from the vacancies used to solve other problems. The overwhelming reason for these vacancies is the lack of competitive compensation compared to comparable jobs in municipalities, other state governments in New England, and the private sector, and the consequences of these vacancies is more pressure on our members left doing all of the work, including workers at DHHS. Our members are calling on you and your colleagues in the 132nd Maine Legislature to immediately restore the \$56 million taken from it last year, and to do so as part of the budget deliberations on LD 2212.

This scheme of increasing the state employee attrition rate to raid the Salary Plan has worsened the recruitment and retention problem throughout Maine State Government. Understaffing throughout all state departments remains a serious problem often with devastating consequences on both state workers and Maine people who rely on their services.

Yet in the wake of the repeated raids on the Salary Plan throughout the Mills administration, the administration now claims it cannot afford anything more than a pair of 2% pay raises for the Executive Branch workers whom we represent. When they made this claim, they specifically cited the impact of the higher attrition rate on the Salary Plan as a reason why. Our members in the Executive Branch have been working without new contracts since July 1, 2025 – that’s over seven months. The proposed pay raises from the Mills administration would widen, not shrink, the state employee pay gap because they would put state workers further behind the cost of living. That’s inexcusable.

Low-pay issues affect workers in all departments of Maine State Government, including workers at the Department of Health and Human Services. We hear from workers statewide struggling with multiple jobs, seeking subsidized housing or public assistance, and making sacrifices – all while doing their jobs as state employees.

For almost a decade, we have pressed the Mills administration and the Maine Legislature to reform Maine’s outdated and neglected state employee compensation and classification system. It no longer reflects the work state employees actually perform, the skills required or the realities of today’s labor market. Three studies, in 2009, 2020 and 2024, show state workers are paid, on average, substantially below both their private and public sector peers. The State’s own study in 2024 put the state employee pay gap at 14% – a 1% improvement over the past five years. The fact is, state workers are falling further behind as they experience Maine’s “affordability” crisis firsthand. Meanwhile, the administration congratulates itself and demands our “thank you” for balancing yet another state budget on our backs.

Budgets are statements of priorities. When you’re in a position of power, your character and morals can be reduced to what gets funded or not. There are a lot of needs facing Mainers. As Maine’s Rainy Day Fund hits its cap and we see a multi-hundred-million-dollar budget surplus, the governor has suddenly decided it’s time to take \$200 million out of the Rainy Day Fund now.

It’s not too late for the 132nd Maine Legislature and Governor Mills to do the right thing. As you review the Governor’s supplemental budget, please make the frontline staff – who carry out the laws and programs passed by the Legislature – a priority by dedicating surplus state revenues to help close the state employee pay gap. We recognize there are opportunities in this legislative session to generate revenue to meet such unmet needs, so we also respectfully ask that you show leadership in ensuring that the State of Maine has the revenues necessary for state workers to do their jobs. A failure to act will only make the problem harder and more expensive to solve, and the consequences more tragic. The time is now. Thank you and I’d be glad to answer any questions.