

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, my name is Kelly Smith. I'm here on my own time because Maine's Executive Branch workers are struggling with chronic understaffing and a persistent pay gap, which we need your help to fix.

I'm proud to serve Maine, and I care about public service. But honestly, as a mom, I can't tell my kids to follow in my footsteps. Not when the pay and conditions look like they do.

The pay gap isn't just numbers on a page. It hits real people every day. It's the reason Maine's state services are stretched so thin.

Let's look at what's happened. A few years back, you could rent an apartment in Augusta for about \$800. Now? It's \$1,400 or more. Groceries, heat, health insurance, everything costs more, but paychecks haven't kept up. For a lot of us, that means putting off essentials, skipping college savings, racking up credit card debt, and taking on second or third jobs.

You probably know someone who works in the Executive Branch. Maybe it's a staffer, a family member, or maybe you started in public service yourself. You get it, the pride, and the sacrifice. So, ask yourself: what if your children or grandchildren wanted to serve Maine but couldn't afford it?

At Maine Revenue Services, we feel staff shortages every day. Divisions are short-handed, so work piles up. We're stuck in a loop, constantly training new people, losing them to better jobs, and starting over. We spend months getting someone up to speed, then they leave for higher pay, lighter workloads, and quicker promotions. It drains morale, hurts productivity, and frankly, wastes taxpayer money.

Young people aren't leaving because they don't care. They're leaving because staying doesn't add up.

I'm on the executive branch contract bargaining team, and I can tell you this ongoing fight to secure fair, market-study-based, competitive wages is a fight for survival, especially in today's economy. It's about whether you are willing to invest in us, the workers who keep Maine running. Will you commit to voting for a budget that ensures our home state can maintain a stable, skilled workforce to deliver what the state needs and protect taxpayer dollars?

In 2024, the estimated cost to close the state employee pay gap was about \$165 million. You have been taking funds from our salary plan for years, justified by budget-shortfall projections and other priorities. We've seen the state post yet another surplus, but the Governor hasn't put money back into our salary plan. We request that you restore the \$56 million in funds that were removed from the salary plan last year. It's not just a request; it's a start toward doing the responsible thing. It's a step toward fairness and stability.

If you ignore this problem, we'll continue to lose good people and valuable experience. The costs of constant turnover and weaker service will end up much higher than the cost of fixing this now.

I want my kids to see public service as something worth doing, not as a financial struggle. I want them to believe that working hard for Maine means you can build a good life.

Please help us by dedicating this budget surplus to restoring our salary plan in LD 2212. We have been without a union contract for 8 months, and the Mills administration claims it cannot afford to provide a cost-of-living adjustment. Please help us make progress on closing the state employee pay gap, begin to properly address chronic understaffing, and ensure that public service in Maine is something people can actually choose.

Thanks for listening and for considering this.

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