

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, Members of the Appropriations Committee. Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, members of the Transportation Committee. I am Tony Baker, and I am here to speak on behalf of MSEA members that work for the DOT Highway Crews across the State of Maine. I'm testifying to request that your committees work to use the state's budget surplus to provide the necessary funding in this supplemental budget for DOT workers and State workers who have been facing massive staffing shortages due to low wages and the State Employee Pay Gap.

Many DOT workers don't have the "luxury" to get a second job, because they have to be on call in case a storm hits, to keep the roads clear for you and your constituents. Many workers have relied on overtime hours to keep their families afloat during the other seasons, but when we have milder winters, that money is not available, and again, they can't work a second job because they are on call. I personally know a number of employees with children, who are eligible for financial assistance programs like benefits, Mainecare, SNAP, and fuel assistance. This is unacceptable and these stories are not insulated.

WAGM has put a Region Manager on air to give public notice about DOT staffing shortages, warning them that the roads will take longer to clear, and it advised the public they are doing everything they can with what they have to work with. Yet we have a budget surplus, and none of that money has been earmarked to support fixing low wages for state workers. You have the power to change that.

Without stipends, the starting wage for Transportation workers is a pathetic \$17.81 per hour. This is \$2.71 above the current minimum wage. As of November 2024, the MaineDOT Highway crew had a 25.38% vacancy rate. Based on my experience traveling to their camps over the last year, I would guess that vacancy rate is even higher now. That staffing shortage, amounting to 300 jobs unfilled, leaves the workforce stretched, plow drivers on the road for over 30+ hours at a time, and increased reliance on expensive consultants and private contractors. We have shared these stories with members of this committee year after year.

The result? In 2025, the legislature voted to eliminate 60 transportation workers jobs, take \$12.3 million from our personal services budget in the Highway Fund, and \$56 million from our personal services budget in the General Fund. These funds are crucial for the State of Maine to invest in these overworked, underpaid, and understaffed, hardworking Mainers. Short handedness leads to safety problems and injuries. Injuries lead to people taking time off, leaving DOT camps further understaffed. This increases the risk of injury for everybody else.

Last month, two Maine DOT workers lost their lives on the job. Dwayne Campbell and James

Brown. There is not enough time, nor enough words to describe how awful this incident has been for MaineDOT, and the families they left behind. Due to this incident, more workers have been leaving the State, because the low wages are simply not worth the risk of not coming home to their families.

Lastly, I want to bring attention to another safety issue that MaineDOT workers have been forced to face. MaineDOT workers are also being forced to clean up the homelessness encampments. This is not what workers signed up for. Now they are being exposed to severe health and safety risks with hazardous materials, including but not limited to, dirty hypodermic needles and biohazardous waste. All while workers just barely, or for some not being able to make ends meet. There has already been an incident where an employee was stuck by a needle during these clean-ups. As a result, the employee now must undergo a multi-month treatment regimen which may or may not prevent the employee from contracting a life-ending disease. These workers have dealt with too much for too long, and we have been asking you to prioritize FAIR pay over the last 4 budget cycles. I urge all committee members to restore funding to the personal services budgets with the \$250 million surplus.

Thank you and I'd be happy to answer any questions.

Tony Baker