

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee. Senator Hepler, Representative Tepler, members of the Marine Resources Committee. My name is Anna Breeden and I am here on my own time to talk about persistent staffing issues and the employee pay gap for Maine's Executive Branch workers. I urge all members of your committees to work to support us by committing to use the state's \$250 million surplus to return the \$56 million that was taken away from the account which could be used to provide the much needed fair wage increases for state employees.

I serve as the Lead Aquarist for the Maine State Aquarium and I have a great amount of pride and love for my job as well as for the state of Maine! I feel very privileged to work with many brilliant and passionate people who do exceptional work for DMR. Unfortunately pride, love and passion cannot offset the reality that the cost of living has risen across the board while wages have not kept pace. At best, this creates ongoing financial stress for employees committed to public service. At worst, it forces them to leave state employment altogether. I have personally witnessed colleagues leave their positions because they simply could not afford to stay.

I myself have been directly impacted by our pay gap. I currently live over an hour away from my job and regularly have to commute around 3 hours a day. I have been working to move closer, but housing in the Boothbay and the surrounding area are far too out of reach. Even while living with family and saving as much as possible, the rising costs of living and commuting expenses, which often exceed \$250 per month make saving difficult. This wages we have now set us up to struggle, and they do not even touch on the reality that the median cost of a home in Maine cost around \$200,000 ten years ago now, but now costs closer to \$400,000.

I am far from alone in commuting so far from work, there are those that I work closely with who come from Augusta, Lewiston, and Portland. Long commutes like this not only put stress on the employees and their families but also can have a real effect on the job. For instance, if an emergency occurs in my department or in maintenance, employees being forced to live over an hour away due to inadequate pay can cause expensive delays and, in the aquarium's case, potentially lead to animal fatalities.

Low pay also greatly affects recruiting, as there are many people who cannot afford to take the jobs. I have seen it firsthand with the aquarium when we hire for the summer. There are many talented, well-educated people that apply, who can't afford to work in Boothbay if we can't supply them with housing. This has a direct effect on the aquarium and the public who visit.

With all this said I urge you to return the \$56 million in funds taken from the salary plan last year. As well as helping us close the pay gap. Many like myself want nothing more than to continue to work for the state of Maine for years to come. Please ensure that we can afford to continue serving the people of Maine