

Testimony in support of LD 673: *An Act to Direct the Maine Criminal Justice Academy to Develop a Nonresidential Law Enforcement Training Program*

Presented by: Matt Tifft, Chairperson for the Public Services and Social Sciences Department, Central Maine Community College

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Matt Tifft, I live in Turner, and I am the Chairperson of the Public Service and Social Sciences Department at Central Maine Community College. I oversee seven programs including associate degrees in Criminal Justice, Forensic Science, Conservation Law Enforcement, Justice Studies, Social Sciences, Psychology, and an Advanced Certificate in Police Operations. I am also in the dissertation stage of my PhD in Public Policy and Educational Leadership program through the Muskie School of Public Service, and writing a dissertation titled, “Exploring Police Training Outcomes” which is an investigation into best practices at college-based law enforcement academies and paramilitary, boot-camp style academies in the United States. I am submitting this written statement to testify in favor of LD 673, *An Act to Direct the Maine Criminal Justice Academy to Develop a Nonresidential Law Enforcement Training Program*. I would also like to thank the sponsor, Rep. Lajoie for sponsoring this bill.

Since I began teaching at CMCC in 2011, I have taught hundreds of students who had the desire to serve their community in the capacity as law enforcement officers. The alumni of my programs have successfully completed the Basic Law Enforcement Training Program (BLETP) at the Maine Criminal Justice Academy and have served with over 50 of Maine’s 146 municipal, county, and state law enforcement agencies. I have also taught many students who were hired as law enforcement officers and did not successfully complete the BLETP. In rare cases, students failed the BLETP for reasons such as poor academic performance and integrity issues. However, most students who did not successfully complete the BLETP, or gave up on their law enforcement pursuits after learning about the structure and demands of the BLETP, had other reasons. These include:

- The mental and emotional strain resulting from social isolation from their support network.
- Single parents, in my experience mostly mothers, who do not have the family support to care for their young ones while being away during the week for 18 weeks of training.
- Parents who care for special needs children who cannot provide the support for their children during the week for 18 weeks of training.
- Muslim students who were concerned about daily religious obligations (e.g., prayer and fasting) that may not be feasible in a boot-camp setting.
- The thought of enduring 18 weeks of a “boot-camp” environment when there are myriad other well-paying occupations that are available.

Maine faces a persistent recruitment crisis for police positions across the state. At a time when the demands for officers to be socially responsible, guardians of democracy has never been greater, it is time we rethink the environment and training methods we employ to ensure the

values and attributes of our officers are aligned with societal expectations. Instead of sustaining the barriers that have kept otherwise worthy candidates from participating or successfully completing the current BLETP model, Maine needs to consider alternatives, especially as 50% of the law enforcement training models across the country are non-residential, with more heading in that direction as time goes on.

I understand that LD 673 calls for additional staff for the Maine Criminal Justice Academy, and that some CJPS committee members have shared concerns with providing more staff. I believe that the Central Maine Community College can assist with accomplishing the objectives of LD 673 by helping to minimize, or perhaps eliminate completely the need for more staff. I have two scenarios to present for consideration:

Scenario #1: Last summer, a group of police chiefs from central and southern Maine invited me to participate in a series of discussions about how to facilitate a BLETP at Central Maine Community College. The police chiefs were frustrated with the persistent backlog of cadets waiting to attend the BLETP (exacerbated by the COVID labor shortage), that the current model was not keeping pace with the demand to bring departments up to adequate staffing levels, as well as the economic and budgetary strain departments were experiencing as a result of the continued labor shortages. I spoke with CMCC President Betsy Libby, and we crafted a plan to host the BLETP on CMCC's campus, to be run as a daytime academy that would allow cadets to go home at the end of the day. Despite the break from the traditional residential model, the group believed this concept was more aligned with the realities of police work in the sense that officers have to learn how to decompress at the end of their shifts and return home to their families.

Auburn Police Chief Jason Moen presented the proposal for CMCC to host a BLETP to the MCJA Board of Trustees last fall. He explained that no additional staff would be necessary, as Portland Police Department was willing to provide an officer to serve as the coordinator in exchange for cadet slots, and there is no shortage of officers eager to teach in the central Maine region. The coordinator would manage the day-to-day aspects of the BLETP including scheduling, being a back-up instructor, communicating with MCJA, and providing the administrative support on-site. The firearms and emergency vehicle operations training weeks would still be completed in tandem with the residential BLETP; both of these training sessions take place off-site from MCJA.

The proposal was ultimately tabled, with the MCJA reviewing committee citing administrative challenges, instructor availability, and an overall sense that it would be difficult to maintain "MCJA standards" with an off-site BLETP. I do not believe that any of the challenges presented by the committee could not have been worked through, and would be open to discussions on how to proceed with this model.

Scenario #2: This option has not been widely discussed at this time, but I would propose shifting Maine's law enforcement training to a competency-based model. Under this scenario, the MCJA Board of Trustees would set the industry standards and the curriculum requirements for law enforcement training in Maine and oversee a state licensing exam. I would offer to facilitate a committee to explore the ways Maine's community college criminal justice programs could align

their curriculums to meet those standards. Maine's community colleges have a rich history in vocational, hands-on learning and provide the most suitable environments for law enforcement training in higher education institutions. For example, CMCC's Criminal Justice Program already teaches such concepts as the history of law enforcement, civil rights issues, criminal investigations, communication, legal issues, etc. Our programs also provide hands-on instruction in tactical patrol skills, de-escalation, defense tactics, officer fitness and wellness, and much more. CMCC is also in the final construction stages of a 4000 square-foot simulation building that would allow for tactical patrol skills, forensic investigations, and virtually any simulation exercise needed for basic law enforcement training.

Upon completion of the training curriculum, and much like the nursing model in the state of Maine, graduates would sit for a licensing exam. After successfully completing their state licensing exams, graduates would have the ability to apply to work at any law enforcement agency in Maine. This would have far-reaching benefits, not only for Maine's law enforcement agencies but also to Maine's taxpayers. For example, under the current model, prospective police applicants endure a lengthy screening process that includes an oral board panel interview, psychological and polygraph examinations, and background checks before they are officially hired by an agency. These processes require massive amounts of time and resources, for an applicant who might not successfully complete the BLETP. After the screening phase, each agency then fronts the money for their new hire's BLETP tuition, and the training equipment needed to attend the residential academy. The up-front costs also include uniforms, duty belts, firearms, and other tools necessary for duty after the academy. Most law enforcement executives would agree that \$30,000 - \$35,000 is an approximate figure for these costs. This is money well spent, so long as that cadet successfully completes the BLETP. Law enforcement agencies (and in turn, the taxpayers) are rolling the dice under the current system, in hopes that the new hires are able to successfully complete the BLETP; a lot of time and resources are lost when new hires do not successfully complete the BLETP, further perpetuating department vacancies. Under Scenario #2, the up-front costs are substantially reduced, considering the low-cost of college tuition at Maine's community colleges (at the current time, recent high school graduates attend Maine's community colleges for free). This scenario would not only remove barriers to police training but would result in a substantial savings to Maine's taxpaying citizens in the long run.

Thank you for considering my thoughts and ideas on how to improve access to police training and remove barriers for potential police candidates. I would be honored to speak directly to the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee to explore a new, more inclusive and sustainable model for Maine's law enforcement training.

Sincerely,

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LD 673

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