

Steve McKay
Woolwich
LD 1234

Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Chair Senator Pinny Beebe-Center
Chair Representative Suzanne Salisbury
RE: LD 1234- An Act to Provide Reimbursement for Health Care Expenses of Retired State Police Law Enforcement Dogs.

Dear Chair Senator Beebe-Center, Chair Representative Salisbury, Committee members, Maine State Police representatives and distinguished guests,
My name is Steve McKay and I come before you to testify in favor of the passage of LD 1234, An Act to Provide Reimbursement for Health Care Expenses of Retired State Police Law Enforcement Dogs.

Through my work with Elanco Animal Health, I have come to know the State of Maine K9 unit. For ten years or more our company has donated vaccines, flea and tick medication, and heartworm medication for all the working and retired K9 officers.

Through these interactions, I have come to realize these K9 officers are State of Maine employees just like the handlers whom they work alongside. These K9 officers help to protect the citizens of Maine in many ways, including but not limited to, assisting with drug enforcement, criminal apprehension, tracking of suspects, assisting in the finding and recovery of lost citizens, and bomb detection. They do this without hesitation or any regard for their own lives. They not only protect the citizens of Maine but also protect their handler and the fellow officers with whom they serve.

When an employee of the State of Maine retires, they receive a pension and health benefits. Why do these K9 officers receive no benefits when they retire? These K9 officers are State of Maine employees, they put their lives on the line just like any other law enforcement officer or first responder. They provide a vital service for the benefit of Maine residents.

The K9 officers typically retire at nine years of age. At the time of retirement, the K9 officer is eligible to be adopted. While technically anyone can adopt them, the reality is the only person the K9 officer can be adopted by is the handler with whom they have worked and lived with for their entire lives.

At the time of adoption, the State of Maine releases all responsibility of the retired K9 officer to the adopting handler and as such the handler becomes one-hundred percent responsible for any care of the retired K9 officer. There are no benefits afforded to the handler by the state of Maine for the ongoing care of the retired K9 officer.

Retired K9 officers can face health issues like any of us in our retirement years, including cancer, kidney issues, liver disease, diabetes and many more. Furthermore, because of the work performed they are also more prone to arthritis, joint and spine issues. Unlike any other State of Maine employee there are no financial benefits to help pay for any of this ongoing care, it is the sole responsibility of the handler.

The cost of this veterinary care can be very expensive. Knee surgery can be \$10,000, arthritis medication can be \$3,000 annually, and cancer treatment can be \$20,000 or more. Currently, with no assistance, the handler must pay one-hundred percent of these expenses. If they can't afford the cost, they face the difficult choice of the next steps.

In 2015, a retired K9 officer was retired because he could no longer perform the duties of his job. Following his retirement, he developed medical problems, and his handler had to take him to the emergency hospital. After running several tests and an MRI, the handler was facing \$7,000 in medical costs. Unfortunately, the retired K9 was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had to be euthanized.

Thus, Representative Hepler and I have submitted LD 1234, An Act to Provide Reimbursement for Health Care Expenses of Retired State Police Law Enforcement Dogs. The passage of LD 1234 directs the State of Maine to fund up to \$5,000 annually for the veterinary care of a retired K9 officer.

I respectfully request that the committee vote in favor of passage of LD 1234 and provide benefits for the retired K9 officer, like the benefits that would be afforded to any other retired State of Maine employee.

Thank you Representative Hepler for your assistance in bringing this important matter to the committee and for your service to the citizens of the State of Maine.

Thank you to all the Maine State Police officers, and all law enforcement employees across the State of Maine, who work so hard and endlessly to keep this great state safe.

Thank you, Chair Senator Beebe-Center, Chair Representative Salisbury, Committee members, Maine State Police representatives and distinguished guests for your time today.

I am available to take questions and will be available for the work session.