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Laborers' International Union

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Good morning Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Jason J. Shedlock and I am a Regional Organizer for the Laborers' International Union of North America. I am also a Trustee and Executive Board Member of both the Maine AFL-CIO and the Southern Maine Labor Council and a resident of South Portland. Relevant to this conversation, I also serve on the Maine Apprenticeship Council as well as the State Workforce Board, having been appointed to both by Governor Mills in 2019. I appear before you in support of LD 648, "An Act To Improve the Lives of Maine Workers by Supporting Apprenticeships That Lead to Good-paying Jobs."

Put simply, this legislation provides the government with the tools it needs to install guardrails on how funding is expended on Registered Apprenticeship programs in the state of Maine. Currently, as apprenticeships come before the Maine Apprenticeship Council for advisory opinion to the Director of the Maine Apprenticeship Program, we do not have the official basis to reject, or even offer suggestions on, beginning or end wages surrounding apprenticeships that receive taxpayer funds and our government's stamp of approval.

We must ensure that taxpayer resources are not spent on supporting job training programs that culminate in wages that do not sustain middle class careers. While this legislation still reserves 25 percent of funding to assist lower-wage programs, it rightly prioritizes the growth and proliferation of Registered Apprenticeships that lead to high-wage, high-benefit careers. We must provide the government with this statutory tool. Failure to do so also fails to reflect our shared workforce development goals.

In the construction field, due to the foresight of lawmakers and the governor, we are seeing an increase in laws that prioritize Registered Apprenticeship as a way to ensure that certain types of work - especially in the renewable energy field - contribute to training the next generation of Mainers while greening our economy and narrowing the skills gaps in our trades across Maine. We must ensure that contractors are not merely "checking the box" and registering their programs at the state minimum wage or at an end wage upon graduation that does not reflect a middle class career. Currently, as we cannot ensure this is the case, we are witnessing the law being taken advantage of. LD 648 is a step in the right direction to address this issue.

When we expend taxpayer funds on Registered Apprenticeships, we need to ensure we are investing wisely. Spending funds on low-wage apprenticeships that lead to poverty-wage careers means Mainers that remain dependent on government assistance; essentially guaranteeing that taxpayers are paying twice for a worker who, through no fault of their own, still remains in poverty. We must catalyze and incentivize high-wage, high-benefit apprenticeships. By doing so, taxpayers invest in a worker once, and set them on a pathway to an honest middle class career with benefits for themselves and their family.

LD 648 is the first step in ensuring the very limited funding we have for Registered Apprenticeships is directed towards programs that reflect our state's workforce development values. While we can and must do more to restore full funding for high-wage, high-benefit programs, like the one implemented by the Laborers' Union, this proposal will ensure that existing funds are not diverted to, and expended on, programs that lead to poverty wages. Please vote ought to pass on LD 648. I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.

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