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Testimony for LD 1436, "***An Act to Protect Certain Essential Workers from Infectious Disease***"

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Serina DeWolfe and I am a staff rep for American Federation of Teachers. I represent approximately 600 members here in Maine; half of which are frontline healthcare workers. Our healthcare members work at Bangor Nursing and Rehabilitation, Narraguagus Bay Healthcare Facility in Milbridge and Penobscot Valley Hospital in Lincoln. Our membership at these healthcare facilities consists mostly of CNAs but we also represent food service workers, administrative staff, med techs, custodians and other ancillary staff.

I am here today to testify in favor of LD 1436, ***AN ACT TO PROTECT CERTAIN ESSENTIAL WORKERS FROM INFECTIOUS DISEASE.***

From the onset of the COVID-19, the lack of adequate PPE has been a major and continuing issue for our members in healthcare settings. No person, regardless of their trade, should ever be expected to go to work without necessary safety equipment at any time, much less during a pandemic. For the past year we have deemed healthcare workers, firefighters, grocery store workers and other essential workers "frontline heroes" yet some employers have responded by treating them as collateral damage. We had members reusing disposable masks, no access to hand sanitizer, no access to hand soap, no face shields and no n95 masks.

At the height of the pandemic when there was a shortage of PPE or it was on backorder, as a labor

group we tried to help these facilities access PPE for our members. We had union shops in Westbrook and Portland working around the clock to make face masks and face shields. Often times we were told that the available PPE was too expensive and the facility declined to buy face masks and other necessary items from these vendors, putting the lives of our members at risk. They chose profit over protecting lives.

One of our local presidents wrote an op-ed in the Bangor Daily News to bring awareness to the lack of PPE for frontline healthcare workers, not only in Maine but nationwide, only to face backlash at work which resulted in disciplinary actions by the employer. Another one of our bargaining units was told at their facility that there were not enough face masks for the food service workers as they needed the masks for the direct caregivers. There eventually were 3 cases of COVID among the kitchen staff which quickly spread to the direct care workers.

Over and over again, we argued, fought and demanded PPE from these employers. I like to call their response the "COVID excuse". We were supposed to just accept that COVID could be the excuse for their irresponsibility. At one point during the pandemic, our national AFT office shipped 600 face masks and 300 face shields to me to deliver to our members. When I sent the information to one administrator, he initially refused to take our help. We had to fight with their attorney and owner of the facility and then threaten to publically shame them if they still refused. We eventually won and they accepted our help. Frontline heroes should not have to threaten to publically shame their employer in order to stay safe at work.

COVID-19 is far from over and as we know, there are now variants of the virus that are more deadly and

contagious than COVID-19. It is imperative that these workers that we have deemed “heroes” be protected while they care for our elderly parents, house inmates, and save our homes from fire. It seems like a basic worker right to have safety equipment to protect your life while you work to save the lives of others’.

LD 1436 is a step in the right direction to protect workers in healthcare, correctional facilities, firefighters, and emergency medical services by mandating a sufficient stockpile of PPE and other necessary safety equipment. We urge you to vote “ought to pass” for this important legislation to protect the lives of frontline workers.