

May 12, 2023

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government,

My name is Ronnette Partridge, I have worked for the state of Maine for almost 17 years. I have been married for 33 years and I have 6 children. I work for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services in Disability Determination Services. I am testifying on my own time as a private citizen in support of LD 1854, An Act to Complete and Implement the Comprehensive Review of the Classification and Compensation System for Executive Branch Employees, sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine.

I started working for the state of Maine in May 2006 I started as a Disability examiner in the Pro Tech Salary Scale grade 20. When I started the minimum wage was \$6.75 my starting wage was \$13.75, \$7.00 above minimum wage. Today the minimum wage is \$13.80 and the pay grade I started at is \$18.94, only \$5.14 above minimum wage. Some McDonalds locations are hiring unskilled crew members at \$18.00 per hour.

Some years ago, the state did a wage analysis clearly showing state employees are underpaid, in the intervening time state wages have not gone up all that much. They certainly have not kept up with the cost of living nor have the upper pay scales been adjusted to keep in line with the increases in the minimum wage.

Our office, DDS, is contracted with the federal government adjudicating Social Security Disability Claims for Maine residents. We currently have 35 case deciders. The work is highly skilled and takes years to learn the process and policies are constantly changing, and it requires a dynamic workforce to adjudicate accurate and timely disability decisions for the people of Maine.

When I started here, all case deciders had to start as Disability Examiners and after a year they could apply to promote to a Disability Adjudicator. Due to staff retention challenges our Director has worked with DHHS and HR and eliminated the Disability Examiner line from our office and promoted all case deciders regardless of skill level from Examiners to Adjudicators. They have further taken to starting new employees at step 4 of the pay scale instead of step 1. This has left our long-term employees demoralized and somewhat upset. We have one employee that has been here 7 years and she is now making the same amount as new hires. This is discouraging as experienced and highly skilled staff are paid close to that of unexperienced and unskilled staff.

We here at Disability Determination services definitely have a hiring and retention problem. Of our 35 case deciders we only have 8 that have been here more than 7 years, and the rest have 3 years or less. Since 11/2020, we have lost 27 Examiners and Adjudicators, most of who were new employees that did not stay long.

The sad part of all of this is that being 100% federally funded, the federal government has offered more money for wages to improve retention, but the state has said no because we cannot make more than other employees in the DHHS pay scales. Disability adjudication for social security is very different from other state programs and Maine Disability Determination Adjudicators should be compensated fairly and appropriately.

The sad part is that Maine is going to lose workers to other states that pay more and have better climates. 43.9% of Maine's population is 50 and older, 20.6% are 19 or younger. 35.4% are between 20-49. Many companies are scrambling for

workers and many of Maine's restaurants already close early due to lack of staff.

MAINE needs to take immediate action with increased and competitive pay to attract and retain a talented workforce to best serve our citizens. Please support LD 1854.