

Testimony of Dean Staffieri
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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.

Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government,
Friday, May 12, 2023, Cross Office Building Room 214 and Electronically

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government, I'm Dean Staffieri, President of the Maine Service Employees Association, Local 1989 of the Service Employees International Union. My union represents over 13,000 workers, including workers in the Executive Branch of Maine State Government. It's an employer I know well, having worked in the Executive Branch for 32 years, currently as a rehabilitation counselor for the Maine Department of Labor and before that as a caseworker supervisor for the Maine Department of Health and Human Services. We're here today 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'd like to start by reminding you of the remarks of Governor Mills at a news conference on January 10, 2023, about the upcoming state budget. Governor Mills said, "We must invest in the infrastructure that supports our greatest asset, which is our people." We wholeheartedly agree on the need for this kind of investment in people – and they include the State of Maine workers who are dedicating their careers to public service despite being substantially underpaid for their work for all or most of their careers.

While you are hearing today directly from many state workers in this room and via Zoom, and from others through their written testimony, many other state workers shared with their stories with me about how the state employee pay gap has financially impacted them, their families and the services they provide. Many of their stories are harrowing. One state worker told of losing an apartment and becoming homeless for a while. Others spoke of being unable to make ends meet or afford childcare or healthcare. Many cannot afford a vacation or the cost of sending a child to summer camp. Many have had to apply for state aid to feed their families. I'd like to share some of their stories, in their own words:

"I need to work a second job nights to support my family. This results in me working 70+ hour workweeks, and less time with my family. If the pay gap were closed and a more livable wage offered to employees, I wouldn't need to have a second job and could have less stress, more work life balance and, most important, time with my kids."

-- A worker for Maine DHHS

"I have been at MaineDOT for more than 20 years. Living off state pay is challenging when the cost of living has gone up a lot. Please fix the pay gap. My understanding is our pay needs to be increased by \$5.00 extra an hour. If MaineDOT wants to hire more people instead of losing them, this needs to be fixed. We are supposed to be representing the state and the pay is not."

-- A worker for MaineDOT

“While the work of public service is rewarding, the disparity in pay also makes it also feel like a sacrifice. I have advanced degrees which are more highly compensated outside of state service. With inflation and rising costs, I feel I have to make a choice between public service or supporting my family. I feel I have no choice but to explore a more sustainable career paths for my family.”

-- A worker for the Maine Bureau of Rehabilitation Services within the Maine Department of Labor

“The pay gap is the reason I'm looking to leave state employment. As a single parent, I can't afford to pay for the necessities and have had to get state aid for food. My kids as part-time workers are making \$15.00-plus an hour and have been offered \$18.00 to go to full time at McDonalds. Yet many in my group don't make that. How is this ok with our Legislature?”

-- A worker for the General Government Service Center the Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services

“With my experience and credentials (macro-social worker), I could go to the private sector for almost \$20,000 raise or go federal government and work entirely remote for almost double my salary. I enjoy what I do so much that I left this job at one point for a new opportunity and came back. But I have a family of 5 kids and 4 of them in daycare. We make JUST a hair too much for childcare assistance but not enough to afford childcare anywhere that doesn't provide a scholarship. We have contemplated many times as a family of me taking a new job to meet my earning potential but we can't argue the benefit of staying in a job I love and am passionate about and some of the other perks of being a state employee. However, making just above the poverty level is a terrible cliff to be on. It's very hard to navigate the never ending balance of not making enough to thrive and making too much to get even just childcare assistance alone would be a huge help with 4 in childcare.”

-- A Maine worker for Maine DHHS

“I'm a TCL in Region 5. I run a 5–6-person crew in the winter months. This is my opinion. We have been running short for the last 2 years, when we do get staffed, another leaves. These are hardworking dedicated employees that can't make a living with us. They find another job for \$4 - \$5 more per hour, even if it's more time away from their family. This impacts our customers, the traveling public. We can see snow from late October through early May, high windstorms, freezing rain and sleet. Losing these employees who we have invested in and trained to maintain our roadways is impacting our customers and their families. I have spoken personally with exiting employees and they truly like their job but have to look elsewhere to support their families. Something needs to be done to retain our people, my opinion, close the pay gap and increase staffing numbers.”

-- A worker for MaineDOT

“I am a single parent and I do not qualify for any services to help with food, fuel, etc. I make too much for things like that but I am barely making enough for a decent apartment, along with daycare, food, clothing, etc. My child has special dietary needs and those are expensive. Closing the pay gap would help ease the burden on things like this.”

-- A worker for the Maine Center for Disease Control within Maine DHHS

"I love my job - everyday I get to serve Maine people out in their communities. But loving my job doesn't pay the bills. After 4.5 years working for the state, I've started looking for other jobs because the pay gap between what I make working for the state of Maine versus what I could be making working for either a private employer or the federal government is just too big. With inflation and skyrocketing housing costs, my salary isn't going as far as it used to. And I'm not the only one -- my team within Maine CDC had seven employees a year ago...now we are down to two. The pay gap is critically impacting the essential services available to Mainers. Please respect Maine state workers and all people of Maine by paying state workers what we're worth and closing the pay gap! With increased gas prices and skyrocketing costs associated with car maintenance and repairs, the current mileage reimbursement for state employees is insulting. Raise the mileage reimbursement rate to AT LEAST the federal rate!"

-- Another worker for the Maine CDC within Maine DHHS

"The pay gap between what we make now and what we should make as mechanics is horrible and needs to be corrected or you will continue to lose employees for that reason. I work 40 hours a week and my wife work as a Ed Tech 3 and we don't make it most of the time with our two incomes. Most of the time we have to juggle stuff around to make it. We also provide for a family of 9. The only thing that keeps me here is the benefits for our children. The pay is not keeping me here and its sad that I have to feel this way."

-- A worker for MaineDOT

"I really enjoy my job, but I feel like at some point I will be forced to leave a position that I have worked for almost 6 years in order to meet my families' needs. I would rather be compensation accordingly so I can continue to serve the State of Maine and stay where I am passionate rather than leave for reasons beyond happiness."

-- A worker for Maine DHHS

"During the COVID pandemic, my family's expenses soared with no school, extra child care costs, extra food expenses, just about everything cost extra. While barely making ends meet prior to the pandemic was a real thing as a State of Maine employee of over 5 years at that time, the pandemic caused that already-strapped budget to implode. Daily expenses started being charged to high interest rate cards just to ensure that basic needs were met. The low wages we are paid caused my family to eventually lose our apartment and to become homeless for a period of time. The housing market in Maine has blown up along with all other expenses and the average cost of rents in my area has gone up by almost 50% in the last couple of years. While we have seen small progress in wage increases in the last couple of years, the 2 to 4% we have received does nothing to compare to the increases to the cost of living is in this state. Couple that with increases to our insurance premiums, higher deductibles, and less medical/dental and vision coverage available and how is anyone supposed to survive, yet alone try to save for our retirements? Our family has had to delay and sometimes permanently postpone medical/dental/vision

visits and treatment plans due to not being able to afford the additional hardship that these bills place on our family. My teenage son started a job at Walmart and started at \$17.00 per hour which is more than someone starting for the State of Maine at an entry level position would make. When is enough going to be enough? It makes it tough to provide the dedicated services and quality support to the residents of the State of Maine when we employees have so much stress in our personal lives associated with worrying about where our children's next meal will come from or how we are going to manage to keep the lights on this month. Since becoming a one-income household, I have had to maintain an additional part-time job over the last 5 years just to be able to keep our entire budget from falling apart."

-- A worker for Maine Revenue Services

"I still qualify for state OFI services, I utilize a food bank to help feed my family. I go hungry often to try to stretch the food we have to allow my family to eat. I have a car that's slowly falling apart and we are unable to fix it often, due to the expense. My husband takes time out of work to do repairs as it's too expensive to have a garage do the repairs. We grow and raise some of our own food and are working on improving our barn to allow us to raise more food. It's exhausting and depressing just trying to meet our basic needs. We pay a lot of money for health and vision insurance that isn't accepted and bills aren't paid, leaving us with unpaid medical bills that we have to pay out of pocket. I love my job but as the cost of living continues to grow out of control, I'm considering having to get a second job, which I know most state workers have to do. It's not fair how hard we work to have to get a second job just to be able to eat or keep a roof over your families head."

-- A worker for the Maine Office of Family Independence within Maine DHHS

"I've worked in the same position - a very technical position managing very large projects and working with multiple state and federal agencies with direct impact on human health and environmental protection - at the State of Maine since 1995 - and I still live paycheck to paycheck. Note that I have very little debt, no car payments and no outstanding mortgage or rent. Just your basic utilities, groceries, gasoline, some vet bills. I buy my clothes at Goodwill. No extravagant travel, vacations or hobbies. My savings account balance is the minimum of \$5 as I CANNOT SAVE MONEY ON MY STATE SALARY! In terms of other employers, in January 2023 the State of Massachusetts advertised an opening for a position doing exactly what I do now (manage hazardous waste cleanup at Dept. of Defense facilities) with a *starting* salary that is over \$15,000 more than what I make after 28 years in my current position. I'm unable to move to Massachusetts but I have considered asking if I could do that job remotely or mostly remotely. This would mean the State of Maine would lose my 28 years of institutional knowledge (the only other staff in my unit who do what I do, with experience working with Dept. of Defense, have less than two years' experience *combined*) as well as all the connections I have made over the past 10 years working with staff from other states and senior staff from the US Office of Secretary of Defense on national committees and work groups. The idea of leaving the State of Maine causes me great anxiety but as I approach retirement in less than 10 years I simply can't afford to live on my state salary anymore."

-- A worker for the Maine Department of Environmental Protection

“The pay gap impacts me such that I am not able to afford to live in the same city where I work without a roommate. The state employee pay has not matched the rising cost of living in Portland for as long as I have worked with the state. If I did not live with my partner, I would not be able to afford to live in Portland. I do not have a car, so living outside of Portland is not feasible for me. Even with the shared rent, I am paying significantly less than half while my partner picks up the slack. I work full time in a skill and knowledge based position at the upper end of the position's pay scale, yet am not paid enough to even rent an apartment on my own. I have seen signs for entry level and "unskilled" positions in the private sector for as much as or more than what I am making. As a millennial, I do not have the luxury of the generational wealth that the generations before me enjoy - I do not have a retirement account as I had never had enough money left over after living expenses to contribute to one, I will likely never be able to purchase my own home, and I certainly would not be able to support children on my salary. The services that Maine employees provide to the people of Maine is worth so much more than the pennies that we receive in return.”

-- A worker for the Office of Family Independence within Maine DHHS

“I am paying \$16,900 annually in childcare as a single parent and \$27,000 in rent, which together is just about 70% of my income. Daycares are still shutting down with positive Covid cases, and parents are still responsible to pay. Without having any Covid protections or fronted sick time, plus the extreme cost of childcare, with wages that are not rising with inflation, it's almost not worth it to work. Since January, I've received a daycare increase, rent increase, car insurance increase, and electricity increase, but no wage increase and that is making it almost impossible to pay basic living expenses. It makes employees bitter and resentful, when private sector jobs are paying so much more. At the very least, wages need to increase with the cost of living annually, not even addressing how underpaid State employees are - this is a bare minimum. Employees will be forced to leave if something isn't done soon because it's just not feasible to exist on State wages. Please consider paying livable wages.”

--A worker for the Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services

“I work in Augusta, and comparable jobs to the one I have right now in places like Gardiner pay \$30,000 more a year. That's almost twice as much as I currently make. And it would be doing the same thing (working in a chemistry lab). As a 38-year-old in a two-income household, I am living paycheck to paycheck. I have no savings. I don't go to the doctor if I can absolutely avoid it. Despite having insurance, going to the dentist, the eye doctor - I forego these things to pay my mortgage. As employees we give so much of ourselves, working past our hours with no compensation because we don't get overtime yet are still required to meet our deadlines. It isn't fair that we give you work for free when what we are being paid is paltry in comparison to other places. Please help us so we can continue to work.”

-- A worker for Maine DHHS

“I am a single woman who works in southern Maine, which means the pay gap impacts me significantly as our cities grow, work norms change, and housing (and everything) becomes even more expensive. I grew up in Maine, have happily worked in Child Welfare for seven years, but am worried I may actually need to leave Maine soon to do this work elsewhere. I have done the research and despite cost of living increasing everywhere, Southern Maine is the least affordable place for me to live in New England explicitly because of the wage gap. Even though I have been frugal and conservative with my life decisions and money (in state tuition, no travel as a young adult, living with roommates) and I have promoted into a respectable job with lots of responsibility, I am still almost 30 and cannot imagine a world where I do not have to worry about my housing situation and cannot fathom having even the slightest chance of saving for a home. It may not be the state’s responsibility to pay us what we need to survive in this economy as it changes, but it seems like it is AT LEAST the state's responsibility to pay us what other social workers in similar states doing similar work are paid. A few years ago, when my car broke down (because I put so many miles on it from being a child welfare caseworker), I had JUST enough money to buy a new one. I made JUST enough money to make the car payments. And of course, my new car racked up 65k miles in the first year, so I can just forget about keeping it long after the car loan is paid off. There is no room in my life financially for even emergencies. There is no room in my life financially for normal things like a reasonable annual vacation. My life is whizzing by and I am wondering if I made a grave mistake working for the State of Maine. It seemed like a responsible thing to do years ago. There is a lot to unpack here. But, lets’ start with the fact that our wages seem to trail behind the outside world's wages by years. When I first started this job in 2017, I barely took home 2k a month. I have been behind ever since despite spending over four years of my life working an average of 15 hours a week overtime (with little sleep and lots of stress). Being promoted actually meant I would make less every month. Why are social services supervisor's wages not reflecting the increase in expertise and responsibility that comes with that? I spent five years not able to make it to scheduled appointments because of this job’s demands, not able to afford my medical bills. Because I have spent so many years just scraping by, I am now almost thirty with almost no savings. Again, I have been careful. But, I do not have a spouse, I do not have inheritance. But, I shouldn't have to. Because I have dedicated work and expertise to show for it, and wish to be paid accordingly. I understand that the humans behind the work are always the least important part of the budget, but despite loving the work I do, I am also here to earn a living. I would like to stay, but I won't be able to make it work much longer.”

-- A worker for Maine DHHS

It’s past time for action to close the pay gap. Fortunately there is a solution to begin doing so. Please support LD 1854. As you consider this legislation, please take to heart the Governor’s words from Jan. 10: “Our greatest asset....is our people.”

Thank you and I would be glad to answer any questions.