

James Bailey  
Hampden  
LD 2121

In Support of LD 2121, An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions, Sponsored by Representative Drew Gattine

February 2, 2024

Senator Nangle, Representative Stover, members of the Committee on State and Local Government, I'm James Bailey, a licensed social worker employed at Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center and president of the Maine Service Employee Association Local 1989 chapter that represents the hospital. I am submitting this testimony on my own time in support of LD 2121 and to highlight the needs of the hospital.

Both State psychiatric hospitals routinely accept and treat many dangerous, mentally ill individuals in the state – individuals charged with aggravated assault, arson, sex crimes, attempted murder, and murder. Some of these patients have tragically already committed heinous crimes and are sent by criminal courts to restore their competence to face their charges or regarding their sanity. But it's possible that many crimes or tragedies are prevented by the hospitals' treatment for individuals before such an act occurs.

Our ability to provide effective treatment goes only so far as our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified, competent staff. When we have many vacancies, others are required to work overtime – sometimes forced – in order to maintain minimums. Staff get assigned more work, burnout increases, and then turnover – further encumbering those that remain. Standards inch lower, corners get cut. When patients have a crisis and require physical intervention, there are fewer staff available to show up. And of those that can, the average experience in safe restraint drops lower and lower. Patients get less individual attention, fewer opportunities to engage in treatment, and are forced to wait more and more. To maintain minimal staffing, the hospital runs between 70-90% capacity, unable to safely care for as many patients as we have beds.

Improving the effectiveness and robustness of the mental health system in Maine has recently been championed in bipartisan unity. And for good reason; it is one of the pillars of a safe community. And public safety is a basic function of state government and is brought about by the people who work for the State of Maine. For every bill passed, for every program created, for every resolution made, and for every benefit enacted it is the State of Maine workforce that makes it happen. And with continued, chronic understaffing, the vast network that makes up a safe community will suffer.

Please support LD 2121. Thank you for your time and consideration and feel free to follow-up with any questions you may have.