



**Testimony of  
Michael J. Crouse, Secretary  
Professional Fire Fighters of Maine**

**LD 2121  
“An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions”  
Thursday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

Chairman Nangle & Stover and distinguished members of Joint Standing Committee on State & Local Government. Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee today in support of LD 2121, “An Act to Address Chronic Understaffing of State Government Positions”.

My name is Michael Crouse, and I am the Secretary of the Professional Fire Fighters of Maine. I am here today representing the views of our President Mike Scott, our Executive Board and over 1,200 Professional Firefighters, Paramedics, EMTs & Communication Operators.

The PFFMaine has been actively involved in improving the health, safety and the lives and livelihoods of firefighters and Communication Operators for more than 75-years. And we are here this afternoon to support the passage of LD 2121.

There is no doubt that LD 2121 would help Maine's regional communication centers by addressing the issues of chronic understaffing, recruiting/retention problems, and the fact that the communication operators in these facilities are underpaid.

Specifically, this legislation would provide funding to increase staffing levels, address the recruiting & retention issues, while at the same time create a new compensation and classification system for these communication operators and other State Employees and close the state employee pay gap to ensure that they have the resources and personnel necessary to effectively respond to emergencies and coordinate emergency response efforts.

Here are some ways in which LD 2121 would help Maine's regional communication centers:

1. Adequate staffing levels in communication centers enable quicker and more efficient response to emergency situations. With more staff on hand to answer calls, dispatch emergency services can coordinate response efforts and communication centers can help reduce response times and improve overall emergency response services.
2. Proper staffing levels in communication centers are essential for coordinating communication between emergency responders, dispatchers, and the public. By ensuring that communication centers have enough staff to handle incoming calls and information, LD 2121 can help improve communication and coordination during emergencies, leading to better outcomes for those in need.
3. Our regional communication centers continue to experience recruiting and retention problems withing their workplace. The inability to recruit and retain qualified employees puts an unnecessary strain on the current employees and may impact the service being provided to our communities. LD 2121 would go a long way toward addressing the serious recruitment and retention problem that has adversely impacted our regional communication centers and ensure that our communication response capabilities are not compromised.
4. Addressing adequate staffing levels and the recruiting and retention problems will lead to improvement in the overall efficiency and effectiveness in emergency response operations. With more staff available to handle calls, dispatch resources, and coordinate response efforts, communication centers can operate more smoothly and effectively, ultimately improving their ability to quickly respond to emergencies and provide critical communication and coordination services to the public.
5. Furthermore, chronic understaffing and the inability to recruit & retain employees can put a strain on existing employees, leading to increased stress, burnout, and decreased morale. The work of our communication operators under these conditions can potentially cause behavioral health issues and other medical problems due to the high levels of stress, trauma exposure, and emotional intensity involved in the job. Communication Operators are often exposed to traumatic events and life-threatening situations on a regular basis, which can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. By providing additional funding for staffing, LD 2121 can help alleviate this burden on communication center staff, leading to a healthier and more productive work environment.

In addition, the demanding nature of the job, long hours, rotating shifts, and lack of control over the situations they are responding to can also contribute to burnout, compassion fatigue, and physical health problems such as high blood pressure, insomnia, and digestive issues.

It is important for communication operators to have access to adequate support resources, mental health services, and coping strategies to help them manage the challenges of their job and prevent long-term negative health effects. Hopefully, LD 2121 will address this issue as well.

6. There is no doubt that our communication operators are underpaid. The new compensation and classification system would address the fact that two studies, one in 2020 and the other in 2009, show that state workers are underpaid by 15%, on average, compared to their public and private sector counterparts in Maine and New England. And in our opinion, the recent record State budget surpluses has been a direct result of underpaying state workers and substantially understaffing quality services for years. LD 2121 would also provide additional funding for a new compensation and classification system for State of Maine Executive Branch workers, including our Communication Operators and close the state employee pay gap.
7. And finally, when our members, firefighters and paramedics, head out to a call, we are working hand in hand with these regional communication centers who are fielding these calls. They play a critical role so that we can do our jobs. As fire fighters and first responders, we depend on them 24/7.
8. Overall, LD 2121 would help Maine's Regional Communication Centers by providing the necessary resources and support to address the issues outlined above, ultimately improving their ability to effectively respond to emergencies and provide critical communication and coordination services to our 1<sup>st</sup> Responders in the street and the public they/we protect and serve.

Mr. Chairman, these are the facts, and they are undisputable and hopefully will be helpful as you and the Committee continue your work on LD 2121.

We hope you see the need to address the issues outlined above and pass LD 2121 that will help alleviate the burden on communication center staff and other state employees, leading to a healthier and more productive work environment ensure that these state employees are compensated for the work they do based on their knowledge, skills, abilities, and their level of responsibility they have in performing this very important service to our communities.

Your support and vote today to pass LD 2121 would be greatly appreciated. If you should have any questions and/or need any additional information, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Respectfully Submitted on behalf of Michael Scott, President of the PFFMaine on this day, Thursday, February 8th, 2024

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