

In support of LD1355, An Act To Expand The 1998 Special Retirement Plan To Include The Civilian Employees Who Work For The Department Of Public Safety Crime Lab And Computer Crimes Unit

I have been a Forensic Chemist at the Maine State Police Crime Lab for 17 years. Prior to that I was a Game Warden, stationed in Aroostook County. Due to a work related back injury and subsequent surgery, I was unable to continue my career as a law enforcement officer. Because I was injured on the job, and could not return to work as a law enforcement officer, I maintained my 25 year retirement plan. I am the only civilian employee at the lab that can retire at 25 years. So, this bill will not benefit me directly. But it will benefit my co-workers.

As a forensic scientist I am held to a higher standard of conduct and performance than any other state employee that I am aware of. First, there is the pre-employment background check and polygraph examination. Then I must pass yearly proficiency tests to be certified to do casework. I take 4 tests every year. We, as an accredited lab, are audited every few years to ensure that we as scientists, our facility, and policies are all within industry standards. All of my case work and reports are reviewed twice for accuracy before reports are issued to the relevant agencies. For every case that I am called to testify, I must be prepared to have my credibility, professionalism and integrity attacked by defense attorneys trying to discredit me as a tactic to assist their clients. And as a forensic scientist, a major error in casework or conduct issue can mean the end of my career because prosecutors are not inclined to use expert witnesses with credibility issues.

Added to the pressure to perform perfectly, is the constant exposure to violence and death. From crawling around in a heavily damaged truck with brain matter and blood everywhere, to examining a laundry basket full of a toddlers clothing for semen stains, to the smell of a body burned beyond recognition in a car fire, and examining blood soaked clothing from a homicide victim. The images and smells never leave you. And rather than becoming desensitized to it over the years, the opposite occurs and you become hypersensitive to it. The undo stress and vicarious trauma effects our emotional, mental and physical health.

Since 1984, when civilian scientists were first brought into the lab, only one has lasted to retirement age. My former supervisor retired from the lab after 30+ years. But the majority of his tenure was as a section supervisor, doing little to no casework.

**One civilian scientist reached retirement age and retired from the lab in the 35 years since civilians were hired at the lab. Everyone else has left before reaching retirement age of 62. And now, the retirement age is 65.**

I know, that without my 25 year retirement, and the ability to retire in just a few years, I would have left the lab years ago for a position somewhere with far less stress and constant exposure to the evil that we deal with. Law enforcement officers can retire at 25 years because of the physical and mental demands of the job. While the physical demands on us are less, the emotional and mental demands are off the charts.

Please support LD1355, to allow for the 25 year retirement benefit for civilian employees of the Maine State Police Crime Laboratory and Computer Crimes Unit.

Michele Fleury  
Forensic Chemist  
Maine State Police Crime Laboratory