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Testimony of Rep. Valli Geiger in support of
LD 1376, An Act to Create a Livable Wage by Increasing the Minimum Hourly Wage
Before the Joint Standing Committee on State and Local Government

Good Afternoon Senator Tipping and Representative Roeder and esteemed colleagues on the Labor and Housing Committee. My name is Valli Geiger and I represent District 42, the city of Rockland, most of the town of Owls Head and the Islands of North Haven, Matinicus, Crie Haven and the Muscle Ridge. I am speaking today in favor of **LD 1376, An Act to Create a Livable Wage by Increasing the Minimum Hourly Wage**, a bill sponsored by Rep. Collings and which I have co-sponsored.

I moved to Maine when I was 21 years-old and a newly minted registered nurse (RN). I had grown up in upstate New York and worked summers at a very swanky beauty salon as a receptionist. I made \$5.99 per hour. When I arrived at Penobscot Bay Medical Center for my first RN job, I was the second RN there with a Bachelor's degree. My starting pay was \$3.99 per hour. I assumed the cost of living would match the wages. It did not.

In the decades since, I have observed that Maine has taken a perverse pride in being a "low wage state." We have consistently had the lowest median income of the New England states and the highest poverty rate. The results of decades of low wages have now come home to roost. Maine is the oldest state in the nation, we have experienced a brain drain for decades as our young people left for college or better opportunities and never returned. We have an acute labor force shortage despite being seen as a highly desirable place to live. With low wages, high living costs and a huge surge in the cost of housing since the pandemic, we are facing a crisis and the viability of our state's future is uncertain.

Maine's minimum wage is now \$13.80 per hour. MIT estimates the living wage in Maine ranges from \$14.28 in Aroostook County to \$17.81 in the Portland Metro area. This wage is based on one adult with no dependents. If you add a child, the minimum wage required to meet basic necessities increases to \$37.67 in Portland and \$30.33 in Aroostook County. Two-thirds of working Mainers cannot afford a two bedroom apartment in any county in Maine, even if they could find one.

Since being elected to represent my community at the State House, I have observed how many programs the state runs to ensure that children don't go hungry, that Mainers have heating and rental assistance and access to health care. These programs are touted as helping low income people, but I see it differently. The state and its tax payers are subsidizing employers who pay too little for people to live on. Whether it is Walmart placing a food box at the front of the store for its customers to contribute for Walmart's employees or onboarding that shows low wage Mainers how to sign up for heating assistance, or

District 42: Rockland, Owls Head, North Haven and part of Matinicus Isle

Medicaid, we have allowed decades of Mainers to struggle on low wages and face the constant indignities of applying for local or state assistance to survive.

It is time to stop subsidizing employers and start requiring that a living wage be the floor from which we set wages in Maine. This bill starts us in that direction. To continue on as we have been is to see Maine become a true "Vacation Land" with increasingly seasonal visitors, and an exodus of our year-round workforce as they find better opportunities in other states. If we want young people to stay here, to move here, to have children here, we must empower them to live a decent and dignified life.

Thank you and I am happy to take any questions.