



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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November 2, 2011

Dear Governor LePage,

I'm writing today to invite you to listen to a group of citizens your administration has ignored: job-seekers. As a State Representative from Lincolntonville, I hear from this growing group of Maine people every day in my community.

In spite of our differences, I know you are willing to listen to all sides. I respect that you have held open office hours with constituents and that you've toured the state holding town hall meetings in each county. You've met with businesses and so-called "job-creators" in workshops and "red tape" tours, but you've made no effort to listen to the 50,000 job-seekers of our state. At times, your comments have belittled this group of struggling Maine people.

In your address to the Maine Legislature last February on the subject of safety net programs, you said firmly, *"Those that can work -- we will simply ask them to get a job."* Most recently you told the *Bangor Daily News* that *"We have got to convince those who can work that we need to get them back to work. Quite frankly, I think that might be a sign that we're paying them a bit too much when they're at home not working."*

I believe a tour of career centers in our state will help you learn the real barriers to finding a job. For every job opening, there are four people vying for it. In September, the estimate of unemployed for Maine was 51,900. Of that group, roughly 19,000 people collect unemployment each week. By that math, 60 percent of the unemployed job-seekers in our state are not collecting unemployment insurance. Plus, unemployment insurance averages about \$6.97 an hour, which is less than minimum wage. I don't know anyone preferring to collect what amounts to a pittance over a hard earned pay check.

Your proposal to cut the unemployment benefits for this struggling group of people, who are barely able to pay for heating oil or feed their families, is not the way to improve our economic situation for both moral and practical reasons. If they can't buy goods and services, businesses will also suffer.

As a state legislator, I often hear directly from these struggling families. I've heard from older Mainers, who worked in manual trades all their lives and now face losing their jobs

because their bodies are worn out from years of toil. They just can't do the same jobs they used to. I've heard from people choosing between working and caring for an infirm relative due to state budget cuts to programs that help care for our most vulnerable. I've heard from single mothers who can't afford child care. They stress mightily over how to provide for their families and care for their children. Working people have been making sacrifices for years. Many wish it were only as simple as just "getting a job," as you suggest.

I know from personal experience that being unemployed is a demoralizing and humiliating place to be. Job seekers in this economy face many barriers. People who have been out of the job market for too long are not as desirable to employers. Older job seekers face discrimination because their age and health make them more expensive to insure. Younger workers often lack the experience many employers seek. Since people are waiting longer to retire, jobs are not opening as fast as they normally would. Folks with advanced degrees find themselves in the peculiar situation of being overqualified for a job. You've mentioned that there are employers out there with job openings, but they can't find any applicants that are qualified. Moreover, many entry level jobs require specific training that is costly and time consuming. Cutting the lifelines of the unemployed isn't going to solve that. Let's put our heads together and solve that problem.

It is easy to make assumptions about people you don't know personally. I am extending to you an open invitation to come with me to the career centers around the state, meet these folks and listen to their stories. I think we can both learn a lot about the barriers they face to obtaining the available jobs you have mentioned. Let's work together on this problem before presenting proposals that will only weaken our state and hurt the thousands of people who have already been knocked down by this recession.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rep. Andy O' Brien, D-Lincolnvile