ELECTIONS 2022

MAINE

GOV. CANDIDATES TACKLE THE ISSUES

LePage, Mills discuss inflation, taxes, caregiving

When Maine voters pick a governor Nov. 8, they'll choose between two familiar faces: first-term Gov. Janet Mills (D) and former Gov. Paul LePage (R), who was in office from 2011 to 2019. Mills was Maine's attorney general before being elected in 2018. AARP talked with the candidates about issues important to older voters. Interviews have been edited for clarity and length.

Are there steps you can take to help combat inflation and the rising cost of living, especially as it affects older Mainers?

MILLS: I'm very concerned about the rising cost of oil. ... So my administration has focused a great deal on climate action in the last few years. And we made it a goal to install 100,000 heat pumps in the first five years or so. ... I've focused on alternative energy sources, on weatherization and on requests [for more money] to protect low-income individuals, including seniors. This year, we provided one of the most robust relief packages of any governor in the country, and that was $850 relief checks for as many as 850,000 people in Maine. And we didn't tell people what to do with those checks. They can save them for the oil bill, they can use them for groceries or gas for the car. It's up to them.

LEPAGE: I would start by suspending the recycling tax on [packaged] food that this governor has put in place until we get our inflation to 2 percent. That would give us time to really evaluate whether it's going to be effective. At least two taxes and fees that have been put on hit the grocery store. I would make sure those are suspended. ... During the months of November to April, I would suspend the tax on diesel and the tax on gasoline and ... take the tolls off all trucks that are bringing in food. ... I would take any surplus monies and make sure that heating oil is subsidized to people in the state of Maine.



Maine's long-term care system is in a staffing crisis. What steps would you take to address this crisis?

LEPAGE: First of all, I would fund long-term care and nursing homes to the fullest. ... [I'd] rehire the thousands of nurses and first responders that were fired because they wouldn't take the jab. ... I would provide training so that we can get more people into the system. Right now, we're firing people and we're hiring people from out of state at enormous rates, and it's just not working. Instead of expanding Medicaid, I would have paid the balance of the premium on Obamacare. Two things would have happened: Hospitals and nursing homes would get better reimbursements, and there would be no work restrictions.

MILLS: We've cut the nursing workforce shortage in half in recent months by expanding training opportunities in the Maine community college and university system. In this recent budget, working across the aisle, we provided two free years of tuition to all recent high school grads. And that is emphasizing not just the traditional trades but also health care and early childhood education. [The health care worker shortage] was highlighted in magazines and newspapers for a number of years before I took over in 2019. We're finally addressing it.

What would you do to address the financial burdens on the state's estimated 181,000 unpaid family caregivers? Do you support paid family medical leave?

MILLS: We provided $2,000 respite grants to family caregivers [of people living with Alzheimer's disease and dementia]. I recently visited an Alzheimer's respite care facility in Gardiner. It was very, very moving. And we want to expand those kinds of facilities and programs. ... I am generally in favor of paid [family medical] leave, but you have to run the numbers. We funded a commission in the most recent budget to do an actuarial study and to look at how it's done in other states. I'm eager to look at the results in those states to see if it's doable in a smaller state like Maine.

LEPAGE: I took care of my mother and my father. I took care of my mother-in-law, my father-in-law. It's not the government's role, it's the family's role. ... It's not a burden when you're taking care of a loved one. At least I don't think so. I'm not a big fan of paid family leave because it's totally abused. I think there's a better way to do it. The best way to do it is you get a robust economy. You make sure people make a lot of money and they can afford to take care of their loved ones.

—Interviews by Natalie Missakian

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