

Olivia Hochstadt  
Portland  
LD 178

Senator Beebe Center, Representative Salisbury and Honorable members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

My name is Olivia Hochstadt, I live in Portland and am 23 years old. I am here to speak in support of LD 178.

I have volunteered throughout the Maine prison system, especially at Maine State Prison, for almost three years since I graduated from Colby College. I organize art programs and an annual art exhibition series featuring works created by artists incarcerated in Maine. During that time, I have met incredibly kind men and women, people with caring hearts, dedication, and knowledge who have been serving decades in prison. One man I met, who had never made art before, decided to submit a few pieces to the show. By creating for a public exhibition, he has “found such peace in drawing and painting. I have grown as a man.” He is now a regular contributor to the series, volunteers as a veteran dog trainer, and has started college. He has even received several inquiries about purchasing his artwork from outside collectors. He is currently serving a life sentence without parole.

I have maintained contact with residents for years, and have come to know them well. Many have processed the act that got them into prison and have come to the other side with maturity, peace, and forgiveness, but are still required to reside in the highest security unit with no programming for the rest of their lives. Instead of providing programming and guidance designed to encourage maturity and positive decision-making, extended sentences without parole infantilizes adults. What kind of life is that?

As a young woman entering the men’s facilities, I not only feel safe, I feel protected by the residents. Not once have I felt uncomfortable teaching my art history classes or leading discussions with the residents as the only woman in the room. The people I have met inside are some of the most respectful individuals I have met; the men are more respectful to me than men in the free world. The residents I teach have developed a supportive space of mutual respect and solidarity that is a joy to be in. Imagine how much better our state would be if the artists I work with who have spent decades in intense dedication to personal growth could be out in the world helping others change their lives for the better.

Maine would be a safer, kinder, and more loving place if these men, women, and people were out in the community. Please give your unanimous support to LD 178. Thank you.