

POSITION STATEMENT IN SUPPORT

LD178, An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community

Presented to Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

As the state's largest grassroots mental health advocacy organization, NAMI Maine supports the passage of LD 178, An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community. Almost 50 years after Maine ended a long-standing parole process for those incarcerated, we are supporting the resumption of a thoughtfully considered graduated system allowing for the recognition of rehabilitation efforts made by incarcerated residents. The banning of the parole programs across the country and the subsequent increase in harsher sentencing practices resulted in a surge in prison populations and a reduction in rehabilitative programs. Inmates were frequently released directly into the community with limited preparation and post discharge support.

We recognize that people who become incarcerated have a much higher rate of experienced trauma, mental illness or severe and persistent mental illness (SMI) that has not been addressed through treatment supporting recovery. In many ways, jails and prisons have taken the place of the mental hospitals and institutions of the 1950s and 60s. The wave of deinstitutionalization across America in the 1970s and 80s came with a promise to create a system of community care to support those with SMI living in our communities. The envisioned community care system included a robust mobile crisis response, Assertive Community Treatment teams applied with fidelity to a national model, and a spectrum of outpatient services. The system of care was never fully funded and built and resulted in our jails and prisons becoming a primary site for managing and treating mental health needs. While Maine DOC has made significant strides in improving care for inmates with mental health and substance use disorders, incarceration remains a less than acceptable substitute for community care.

Parole offers eligible men and women an opportunity to be released from incarceration to community supervision and can help align the goals of punishment to include a focus on cultivating rehabilitation. Parole determinations focus on rehabilitative progress beginning on or after the earliest release eligibility date set by this legislation or the sentencing judge. When released to parole, conditions are imposed that generally include reporting to a parole officer, staying at the same address, submitting to urinalysis and blood tests, and obeying all state and local laws. Those who fail to comply with the conditions of release face the consequence of returning to prison to finish their sentence, or in some cases, serve a new sentence. This is a significant incentive to maintain good behavior.

NAMI Maine appreciates any strides toward a more humane and rehabilitative system in corrections and supports this legislation as the next logical step.

—ABOUT NAMI MAINE: *Incorporated in 1984, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Maine Chapter (NAMI Maine) is the state's largest grassroots mental health organization. With support from national and regional affiliates, the agency is dedicated to building better lives for everyone impacted by behavioral health concerns. NAMI Maine engages with leaders and community partners at all levels to improve the state's mental health system through collaboration and education.*

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POSITIONS & POLICY AGENDA
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