

Testimony of Whitney A. Parrish Perry

## **In Support of LD 178**

### **An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community**

Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

March 13, 2023

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Whitney Parrish Perry, and I am a resident of Augusta. While I was unable to attend the public hearing due to a serious chronic health condition, I am writing in enthusiastic support of LD 178, *An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community* and send my deepest gratitude to Chair Sen. Pinny Beebe-Center for introducing this critical piece of legislation.

In 2022, I served as a commissioner on the Maine State Legislature's Commission to Examine Reestablishing Parole. I occupied the seat designated for a "representative of an organization advocating for the interests of racial minorities" as then-Acting Executive Director of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations, and I thank the Honorable Jeffrey Evangelos for his extensive work on this issue and care in crafting the commission's composition. There is no way to talk about the criminal legal system, in Maine or the U.S., without acknowledging and confronting the differential and unjust treatment of Black people, especially Black men, and other community members of color in that system. I believe that reestablishing parole is one step we can take together toward uprooting past and ongoing harms to create a more just, healthier, and safer place for all of us.

You have heard excellent testimony and evidence of why reestablishing parole matters, and I do not know that I will say anything here that you have not heard. However, I acknowledge that I may hold a unique viewpoint given my orientation to the issue: as a commissioner, as someone who has worked extensively in criminal legal reform and transformation in Maine, as someone who has watched and personally felt the impacts—and fall out—of incarceration, as someone who previously worked in the domestic violence field in Maine, as a survivor myself, and as someone who intensely believes in transformation and **hope**.

With that said, I want to share what I found most compelling from my time serving on the commission—where we found the broadest agreement among commissioners. While consensus can be nearly impossible in any body comprised of individuals from different political parties, ideologies, backgrounds, and beyond, the threads woven throughout that stuck out most for me include:

1) Among supporters and non-supporters of parole, we believe the safety, comfort, rights, and agency of survivor/victims are essential priorities.

I believe parole and other mechanisms of release are not and should not be antithetical to maintaining the safety, comfort, rights, and agency of survivor/victims. In fact, as evidenced by presenters and testifiers, non-carceral pathways to rehabilitation and undoing harm are often encouraged by survivor/victims. Many survivor/victims acknowledge that incarceration causes harm in itself and that this does not make them or their communities more safe. They also acknowledge that unnecessarily long prison sentences do not create safety and often cause more harm. Of course, there is no “one-size-fits-all” response from survivor/victims, just as there is no one-size-fits-all solution to addressing harm—though the pervasive use of incarceration attempts to suggest otherwise with little to no evidence to support its efficacy. A carefully crafted parole system that preserves the agency and rights of survivor/victims is possible, and I believe we can achieve that here.

2) Among supporters and non-supporters of parole, restorative practices and justice were upheld as critical components of rehabilitation and support, both for those harmed and those who caused harm.

I believe the reestablishment of parole is, in itself, restorative. Additionally, there are multiple touch points in a parole system where restorative practices can be employed. The current way of doing things—from arrest to conviction to incarceration to reentry—does not seek to heal, nor does it heal. It does not give incentive to change or make different choices. It does not give hope. I fundamentally believe that systems of punishment do not facilitate healing, do not instill hope, and only perpetuate harm. I lost track of the number of times the phrase “hurt people hurt people” was said during commission meetings, including by survivor/victims’ rights groups. If hurt people hurt people, let’s do everything we can to promote their healing and well-being.

It is important to note here that there was ample talk—on and off mic—from corrections and corrections-adjacent commissioners and state employees about the incredible work and accomplishments of individuals currently incarcerated in Maine. This was often given as evidence of why the current system is “working.” “Working for whom, for what, and to what end” is a question I think about often, especially given the financial and human costs of incarceration. Why keep someone incarcerated if they have completely transformed who they are?

The accomplishments of these individuals are real, though. However, credit for these accomplishments does not lie in the practice of incarceration or with the Department. It lies in the individuals who built community care and support in impossible circumstances. It lies in their personal desire to heal and to promote the healing of all people who have been harmed, victims and prisoners alike. It lies in their hope for a different tomorrow—a tomorrow that allows them to thrive and contribute beyond the confines of incarceration.

3) Among supporters and non-supporters of parole, we believe we must invest more financial and human resources into community safety beyond the criminal legal system. Housing, health care, public health infrastructure, and other investments are critical to reducing harm and building whole communities.

Reliance on incarceration is a public health issue. Period. It does not address root causes for harmful behavior, it does not promote healing, it hurts the children and families of incarcerated people, it hurts the economic future of communities, and there is no evidence that it is making us more safe. The things that do make us safer include robust, self-determined public infrastructure, low barrier access to health care and support services, economic opportunity and security, and beyond.

There are a lot of talking points about this being an “either/or” situation. I believe it’s an “and” situation—we can create meaningful, accessible pathways to rehabilitation AND resource our communities appropriately. We have the funds; we need prioritization.

Reestablishing parole will take a lot of work. It will require ample care and deliberate implementation. I know you, your colleagues, and others invested in creating safety in our communities are up for the task, and I believe your work can positively reorient our priorities away from punishment and toward transformation, health, and real safety. I ask that you vote **‘OUGHT TO PASS’** on LD 178 so we can continue working toward that common goal.

Whitney Parrish Perry  
Augusta  
LD 178

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