

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Mareisa Weil, I live in Freedom, Maine, and I am submitting testimony today in support of LD 1863, An Act to Facilitate the Provision of Medically Appropriate Levels of Care for Clients of Correctional Facilities.

One of the most memorable and impactful experiences of my life so far has been working in the volunteer hospice program at the Maine State Prison. Working with the inmates at the Maine State Prison gifted me the opportunity to wrestle with difficult concepts: Is the point of prison to punish or rehabilitate? What is the right way to treat people who have done wrong? Are people more than the worst things that they ever did?

Every inmate is someone's sibling, parent, grandparent, child. Every inmate means or has meant something to someone on the outside. In a 2001 study published by the National Institute of Justice, researchers found that being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59 percent, as an adult by 28 percent, and for a violent crime by 30 percent. Intellectually, we know that there is a cycle of violence that gets repeated and that this plays out in our criminal justice system over and over again. Abusers were very often abused themselves. I think that this is an important thing to remember when we consider how we should treat incarcerated individuals. It is easy to get caught up in the crime and the suffering of the victim, and it is easy to dehumanize the perpetrator. But I strongly believe that we should resist this instinct to dehumanize offenders and judge them only through the lens of the worst thing they ever did. The state is in charge of incarcerated individuals; we hold all the power in terms of how they live and, in many instances, how they grow old and die. When people face their end of life under conditions of incarceration, or have to attempt to navigate complex challenges related to their health or abilities while incarcerated, we have a choice whether to act compassionately or not. And the choice we make reflects on us, the people on the outside, and the people who are in charge of their incarcerated existence.

Pearl S. Buck once wrote that "Our society must make it right and possible for old people not to fear the young or be deserted by them, for the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members." Incarcerated individuals are helpless, and by design they are deserted, separated from the outside world and its inhabitants. It reflects deeply on us as a society how we treat these people who are so vulnerable and so removed from the watchful eye of the greater community.

For our own psyches, our own souls, whatever you believe to be our essential humanity, I think that we owe it to ourselves to provide high quality, community-based care to vulnerable, incarcerated people and address their health care needs comprehensively, regardless of the crimes they have committed. And so I urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 1863, An Act to Facilitate the Provision of Medically Appropriate Levels of Care for Clients of Correctional Facilities. It is compassionate, humane, and the right thing to do. Thank you.