

## **Testimony Before the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee**

*Date: January 25, 2025*

Good morning, Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and the distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Linda Small, and I am the Executive Director of Reentry Sisters, an organization dedicated to supporting currently and formerly incarcerated women.

We can all agree on the critical need to support the best interests and wellness of all Maine's children, especially those with incarcerated mothers. Maintaining strong, healthy relationships between incarcerated moms and their children is vital to the well-being of both, and these relationships often depend on the financial support of families. This bill threatens to place an even greater strain on families already struggling to meet the needs of their loved ones.

The majority of incarcerated women in Maine are indigent. They rely on their families—not just for emotional support, but also for financial assistance to meet their most basic needs. These families are already stretched thin, sending money to ensure their loved ones can afford essentials like hygiene products, supplemental food, and phone accounts to stay connected with their children.

Increasing the cost of medical and dental visits to \$25 creates an unsustainable financial burden. For many women, this would mean choosing between seeking necessary medical care or maintaining contact with their children—an impossible choice for a mother.

To put this into perspective: even those fortunate enough to have a paid job inside the facility earn only cents per hour. It would take weeks of labor to afford one visit to the medical department under this proposed fee structure. For women who are unable to work, the burden falls on their families, many of whom are already struggling to make ends meet.

This bill also risks undermining public health within the prison system. When medical care becomes unaffordable, individuals delay or avoid treatment. Small, treatable issues become larger health crises, increasing long-term costs for the Department of Corrections. In essence, this policy would harm not just incarcerated women and their families but also Maine taxpayers.

Health care is not a privilege—it is a human right. Denying access to care by imposing prohibitive fees is both unjust and inhumane. The women's correctional facility has no hospice program and workers in the men's prison are volunteers who donate their loving care to others in need. There are other ways to fund volunteer hospice and medical support staff without disproportionately harming the most vulnerable.

I ask you to consider the faces behind these numbers: the mothers trying to stay connected to their children, the daughters leaning on their families, and the sisters and grandmothers who are doing their best to survive in a system already stacked against them. I urge you to reject this bill and protect the dignity and well-being of Maine's incarcerated women and their families.

Thank you for your time and attention.