

Testimony in support of LD 1749
the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
April 28, 2025

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Johnson and I am a resident of Sanford.

I am writing in support of LD 1749, Resolve, Directing the Department of Corrections to Study Achieving Gender Equality

I volunteered as an educator at the York County Jail for 15 years, for a few years at the Maine State Prison Women's Center and Women's Reentry Center, and was an educator at a women's prison in the south west for 4 years. As a citizen and taxpayer I would like to see a public report on the medical, mental health, educational, vocational, volunteer and reentry programming and policies administered or overseen by the department.

System impacted women have unique needs as documented in a July 2024 report from the Council on Criminal Justice titled: [Women's Justice - A Preliminary Assessment of Women in the Criminal Justice System](#). Just a few of the specific needs of incarcerated women that the report describes include:

“Along with limited access to menstrual supplies during confinement and the distinct healthcare needs of pregnant and postpartum women behind bars, incarcerated women face a range of other physical health challenges during confinement, including inadequate nutrition and higher rates of cervical cancer and many chronic illnesses.

Chronic conditions that were higher among incarcerated women included cancer (8% of women compared to 1% of men), hypertension (22% compared to 17%), diabetes (7% compared to 3%), arthritis (20% compared to 13%), asthma (24% compared to 14%), and hepatitis (10% compared to 5%).

Women are twice as likely as men to be identified as experiencing serious psychological distress and are three times as likely to be diagnosed with PTSD.^{1,2} Women are also more likely than their male counterparts to be identified as having “serious mental illness.”

¹ Bronson, J. & Berzofsky, M. (2017). *Indicators of mental health problems reported by prisoners and jail inmates, 2011-12* (NCJ 250612). Bureau of Justice Statistics.
<https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/3872819/Indicators-of-Mental-Health-Problems-Reported-by.pdf>

² Baranyi, G., Cassidy, M., Fazel, S., Priebe, S., & Mundt, A. P. (2018). Prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder in prisoners. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 40(1), 134-145.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5982805/>

A committee opinion from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists published in 2021 stated:

There has been limited attention to addressing incarcerated women's gender-specific health care needs, which may be in part due to the smaller proportion of the incarcerated population that they represent, facilitating their neglect. However, it also relates to the inherently male focus of the system that has allowed women's needs to be eclipsed or conflated with those of males who are incarcerated.³

This limited focus on gender-specific health needs is reflected in the lack of data and policy related to menstruation, pregnancy, prenatal care, and birth outcomes for incarcerated women.

In 2020, the U.S. Commission on Human Rights highlighted a national trend of prison systems consistently providing lower-level and highly gendered programs to women.⁴ Research suggests that prison programs prepare men for work and economic mobility while focusing on women as caretakers and in roles deemed more domestic and feminine, such as administration, hospitality, and beauty work.⁵ These program offerings do little to address the higher rates of mental health and substance use disorders in the female prison population and have been criticized for failing to prepare women for high-paying jobs upon release.⁶ “

This is just one report detailing the unique needs of incarcerated women. I hope you find the data and conclusions as compelling as I have, and support directing the Maine Department Of Corrections to study and report on any gender inequalities present in the programs, services, facilities and policies administered or overseen by the department and recommend potential solutions.

I hope you will support LD 1749.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sarah Johnson

Sanford, Maine.

<https://counciloncj.org/womens-justice-a-preliminary-assessment-of-women-in-the-criminal-justice-system>

3 Sufrin, C. & the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' Committee on Health Care for Underserved Women. (2021, July). *Reproductive health care for incarcerated pregnant, postpartum, and nonpregnant individuals*. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists' Committee on Health Care, Number 830.

<https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2021/07/reproductive-health-care-for-incarcerated-pregnant-postpartum-and-nonpregnant-individuals>

4 U.S. Commission on Human Rights. (2020). *Women in prison: Seeking justice behind bars*. <https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/2020/02-26-Women-in-Prison.pdf>

5 Crittenden, C.A., & Koons-Witt, B.A. (2017). Gender and programming. *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, 61(6), 611–644. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X15601432>; Morash, M., Haarr, R. N., & Rucker, L. (1994). A comparison of programming for women and men in U.S. prisons in the 1980s. *Crime & Delinquency*, 40(2), 197–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001128794040002004>; U.S. Commission on Human Rights. (2020). *Women in prison: seeking justice behind bars*. <https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/2020/02-26-Women-in-Prison.pdf>

6 Crittenden, C.A., & Koons-Witt, B.A. (2017). Gender and programming. *International Journal of Offender Therapy & Comparative Criminology*, 61(6), 611–644. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X15601432>; Morash, M., Haarr, R. N., & Rucker, L. (1994). A comparison of programming for women and men in U.S. prisons in the 1980s. *Crime & Delinquency*, 40(2), 197–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001128794040002004>