

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH

In Support of LD 1844

An Act to Expand the State's Workforce by Supporting the Transition from Incarceration to Employment

Presented by Representative Sayre

Before the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, May 5, 2025

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and Members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, my name is Lani Graham. I am a physician and public health expert from Freeport in support of LD 1844.

I debated whether to support the bill or offer testimony neither for nor against, because this bill falls short of assuring that our Maine Department of Corrections (DOC) provides incarcerated people with the critical preparation and tools they must receive before successfully reentering their communities. The bill sets out some laudable goals that encapsulate what is needed, it fails to place priority on those goals by describing them as being provided “within the limits of available resources”. Assuring that an incarcerated person will make a successful transition to the community when released, as 90% of the incarcerated are, should be a top priority of the DOC. Also, this bill fails to specify that people who are to be released into the community should not spend the months prior to that release in isolation from others, such as restrictive housing, where they cannot learn safely how to interact successfully with others and where their mental health may be further damaged. I can think of several amendments that would make this bill better.

So why then do I support this bill? I support it because it sets out a reasonable outline of what should be expected that the DOC will provide to those returning to their communities. Perhaps we can look specifically at returning people and find out which, if any, of these important elements were provided. It is an outline that can be provided to the incarcerated to help them understand what they need for a successful reentry.

I want to provide a brief story that illustrates the necessity of doing a better job in helping the incarcerated reenter life outside the walls. This story is largely in the words of a man I met just a year ago who is now back in prison. This quote is only part of the story he wrote about his prison life and deals with only two of the reentry needs this bill outlines.

“Because I am a veteran I managed to get on the Veteran’s list for housing and had been told I would have a healthy place to live once I was released. But the day before I was released, I was told that I would not be eligible for that housing due to the robberies I had committed. Therefore, the day of release, I was simply given a ride to city of Portland by the prison staff.

Fortunately, there I was met by a member of the Maine Prisoners Reentry Network. They have been trying to find me a place, but so far nothing has turned up. I had to use my Veterans disability payments to support a room in a motel. I used the money I had hoped to have available to start a new life. The motel had many residents with substance use problems and soon I too was once again using drugs.

Since discharge from prison, I have overdosed twice, been hospitalized for many days, and been treated for multiple kidney stones. The expense of all this care, mostly in the hospital has been in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Wouldn't it have been better to spend that money helping me to get the right treatment for my illnesses and a place to stay? "

Thank you for considering the support of this bill, which, though flawed, is a step on the road to better reentry for the incarcerated, which in turn is vital for Maine communities.