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LD 1941

My name is Melissa Kusmierz, and I am a nurse with over thirteen years of experience, including extensive work in correctional healthcare. I am here today to speak in strong support of LD 1941.

As a corrections nurse, I work with people long after sentencing is complete and public attention has moved on. I care for individuals not as case numbers or headlines, but as patients. I see how policy decisions made in this room play out years and decades later, in bodies, in mental health, and in the daily functioning of correctional facilities.

A significant portion of my work has been with incarcerated women in Maine, many of whom are serving long sentences. In my experience, these women are often first-time offenders. They are also, consistently, the people doing the hardest and most meaningful work inside the system.

These are the women who earn college degrees while incarcerated. The women who hold steady jobs inside facilities or remotely when permitted. The women who mentor younger peers, de-escalate conflict, and quietly stabilize entire housing units.

They become the backbone of their units. They model accountability, consistency, and growth in environments that are often chaotic and under-resourced.

And they do all of this without the possibility of parole.

At the same time, I repeatedly see individuals serving short sentences for low-level offenses cycle in and out of incarceration. Those women are released, return, are released again, and return again. Meanwhile, the women serving long sentences, who have demonstrated sustained change over many years, are categorically denied even the opportunity to have their progress reviewed.

From where I stand inside the system, that contradiction is impossible to ignore.

What is especially striking is that these long-sentenced women continue to pursue education, employment, and leadership despite knowing that parole is not currently available to them. That fact alone speaks volumes. It demonstrates an intrinsic desire to change, to contribute, and to live differently. These are not people performing rehabilitation for an incentive. These are people who have rebuilt themselves without being promised anything in return.

As a nurse, I also see the medical and psychological consequences of removing all hope of review. The absence of parole contributes to depression, institutionalization, cognitive decline, and worsening chronic illness. People age faster in prison. Women develop complex medical needs that correctional facilities are not designed to manage long-term. Prisons increasingly function as geriatric and long-term care facilities without the staffing, infrastructure, or dignity such care requires.

This affects staff as well. Nurses, officers, and clinicians are stretched thin managing aging populations who could safely be living in the community under supervision. This is not humane, and it is not fiscally responsible.

Parole is not automatic release. It is a careful, structured, evidence-based review process. It allows the state to evaluate who someone is now, not just who they were at their worst moment. It creates incentives for rehabilitation, accountability, and long-term behavioral change. It improves institutional safety by giving people a reason to invest in their own growth and the stability of their environment.

Parole is also a financially responsible policy. Individuals released through parole can work, pay taxes, support families, and access healthcare in the community at a fraction of the cost of incarceration. Continued incarceration of people who pose little public safety risk is one of the most expensive and least effective choices a state can make.

I want to be clear: after years of working with incarcerated women who have transformed their lives, I would be honored to have many of them as my neighbors. I trust them more than a system that refuses to acknowledge their growth.

LD 1941 reflects thoughtful, commission-driven recommendations and a commitment to public safety rooted in evidence, not fear. As someone who works inside this system and cares daily for the people impacted by its policies, I urge you to support this bill.

Thank you for your time and for your willingness to listen to those of us who live with the consequences of these decisions every day.