

Senator Beebe Center, Representative Hasenfus, and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee:

My name is Pedro E. Santiago, and I am a resident of Knox County currently housed at the Maine State Prison. I am writing in strong support of **LD 1962 An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman.**

This bill is a vital step towards strengthening transparency, fairness, and accountability within Maine's correctional system. We the people, call for an an independent office, separate from the Department Of Corrections, to ensure that the safety and well-being of both staff and residents are upheld. Unlike the Maine Boards of Visitors, which have limited scope and authority, an ombudsman would provide meaningful, impartial oversight.

During my time at the Maine State Prison, I have witnessed both improvements and ongoing challenges in the orderly management of the facility and it's disciplinary system. While some progress has been made, the persistence of unjust acts often stems from a culture of "protecting their own," leaving residence with little recourse when grievances arise.

For example, since the facility moved to a three-and four-day split work week, dividing staff into alternating "A" and "B" shifts, the prison has spent significantly more time on lockdown compared to when operated under a three-shift schedule. These extended lockdowns not only disrupt daily life, but also hinder programming, education, and rehabilitation opportunities, which are essential to successful reentry.

Additionally, the current disciplinary process lacks transparency. Hearing minutes are often incomplete or selectively recorded, given the Disciplinary Hearing Officer disproportionate control over the record. Exculpatory evidence is too often omitted, leaving residents without a fair avenue for appeal. Without oversight, these systemic

flaws, undermine trust in the very processes meant to maintain order and justice within correctional facilities.

An independent ombudsman would serve as a bridge, ensuring accountability, while fostering, fairness, dignity, and safety for all. Such a role would not weaken the Department Of Corrections; rather, it would strengthen it by ensuring that problems are addressed openly, policies are applied consistently, and public trust is restored.

At its heart, LD 1962 is not just about oversight; it is about humanity. It affirms the correctional institutions can, and should, be places of growth, fairness, and rehabilitation, not secrecy and mistrust. By establishing the Corrections Ombudsman, Maine has the opportunity to set a standard of transparency and accountability that reflects the values of justice and integrity our state holds dear.

Thank you for your time and for considering this important measure.

Respectfully,

Pedro E. Santiago
Maine State Prison
Warren, Maine