

Testimony in support of SP 769/ LD 1962
An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman

To: Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

From: Craig McEwen, 45 Eastern Promenade, Apt. 5D, Portland, ME 04101

On behalf of myself and the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, I am writing in strong support of **An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman**. I am a retired sociologist with expertise in criminology and corrections and in dispute resolution.

The Corrections Ombudsman bill will strengthen the Department of Corrections' capacity to implement the Maine Model of Corrections which seeks to promote "the safety and wellbeing of staff and residents" by "working collaboratively to model problem-solving, community building, and healthy interactions with others." It will do so by adding an independent and skilled problem-solver to assist employees, residents and administration in addressing the inevitable tensions in a prison system.

The Corrections Ombudsman would do what neither the Boards of Prison Visitors nor the internal grievance processes for staff and residents can do. The professional ombudsman will have dispute resolution skills and act with the independence and authority that the Boards do not have. Because each institution has a separate Board, they cannot address overarching Department policies and practices. Although occasionally effective, the current grievance processes for residents and staff do not have the full confidence of either residents or employees. As a result, many issues -- some systemic -- go unaddressed. The failure to address these issues through the Boards of Visitors and grievance processes can erupt in public, as these headlines from the last few years indicate:

- "Educators, maintenance staff and supervisory staff at Long Creek Youth Development Center in South Portland outlined their concerns and demands in a letter to the Department of Corrections."
- "Maine guards mocked prisoners, disparaged minorities and shared confidential records"
- "Hazing, harassment and inappropriate relations between staff and inmates alleged at Maine State Prison"
- "'It's Horrible' — Report Alleges Improper Care By Private Health Provider In Maine State Prison"
- "Maine State Prison residents launch hunger strike over conditions they call solitary confinement: Maine Dept. of Corrections confirmed the strike but disputes residents' claims about conditions"

With a Corrections Ombudsman in place, such concerns can be raised and addressed and problems solved before they become public scandals or lawsuits. Most important, the work of a Corrections Ombudsman will increase the health and safety of staff and residents in Maine's corrections system and reinforce the Maine Model of Corrections.