

Testimony in support of LD1962: An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman

I am writing in support of LD1962: An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman out of concern for the public health emergency connected to mass incarceration.

Throughout the 25 years visiting my friend in prison, I was struck by the health conditions of those who were incarcerated and their family members, I repeatedly heard stories of premature deaths and perpetual mental and physical health ailments, distinct from those I encountered in my everyday life far from the prison gates.

The American Public Health Association has tied poor health outcomes in the United States with mass [incarceration](#). Compared to the general U.S. population, incarcerated individuals have a higher prevalence of acute and chronic health [conditions](#). These include higher rates of infectious [diseases](#), substance use and [mental health disorders](#), traumatic [brain injuries](#), heart-related illnesses, hypertension, diabetes, asthma, stroke, among [others](#), along with overall lower [life expectancy](#) and premature death. Marginalized individuals are overrepresented in U.S. prisons and jails including those without [stable housing](#); people with [disabilities](#); individuals with [mental illness](#) and those with [substance](#) use addiction. Moreover, about 50 percent of incarcerated individuals lack health insurance upon the time of [their arrest](#).

Prisons and jails have become a last resort for people to access medical care, medication, and mental health support. However, this care is grossly inadequate, and prisons and jails are known to compromise health due to poor sanitation, limited heating and ventilation, low quality diets, and medical neglect. Incarceration can also seriously degenerate mental health through overcrowding, isolation units, violence, sexual assault, separation from family and [overall stress](#). For each year spent in prison there is an associated [two-year decline](#) in life expectancy. The average life expectancy of a correctional officer is about 16 years less than the national average at around 59 years, related to workplace [stress](#), high rates of suicide, [and PTSD](#). Here in Maine, healthcare is provided by Wellpath, one of the largest private correctional health-care companies with \$40 billion [dollar market value](#). Currently Wellpath is facing dozens of lawsuits nationally due to its poor care [provisions](#) and declared bankruptcy in 2024.

One manner of addressing this public health crisis here in Maine is to support LD 1962 An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombuds in the state of Maine. A Correctional Ombuds would provide an unbiased window into the medical care in incarcerated settings to suggest [improvements](#). Having eyes and ears in our carceral settings is vital to stem this public health crisis.

Nicole Coffey Kellett