

January 12, 2026

TO: The Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

RE: LD 1923, An Act to Repurpose Long Creek Youth Development Center and Build a Community System of Support

Dear Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

My name is Jill Ward, and I am a resident of Portland, Maine. I have worked on juvenile justice policy and reform for more than 20 years both nationally and here in Maine. Most recently, I served as a Senior Policy Advisor to the Administrator at the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Currently, I direct the Maine Center for Youth Policy at Maine Law and have been involved in efforts to reform Maine's youth justice system, including serving with Representative Brennan and Commissioner Liberty as one of three co-chairs of the 2019 Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment and Reinvestment Task Force.¹ My testimony represents my own views and not the position of the University of Maine School of Law or the University of Maine System.

As one of the three Task Force co-chairs, I support LD 1923 as consistent with the findings of the 2020 Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment² and an important step in helping to implement the changes recommended in that report. Recognizing the research documented the ineffectiveness and harm of incarceration, jurisdictions across the country have enacted reforms to close and/or repurpose youth prisons, remove youth from confinement in youth prisons, and increase investment in community-based alternatives to incarceration. Kansas, Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia, Wisconsin, Texas, New York, Illinois, Vermont, and Utah have reduced their reliance on incarceration, closed or repurposed large youth prisons, and shifted investments to community-based alternatives to incarceration.³ Late last year, New Hampshire held public hearings about the planned redevelopment of its remaining youth prison.⁴

While Maine has engaged in similar reform conversations in recent years and invested in several collaborative, community-centered initiatives like Regional Care Teams,⁵ probation transformation reform (aka Youth Community Supervision Initiative),⁶ and local continuum of care projects, those efforts have only gone so far. There remain large gaps in the

¹ For more information see, www.mainejjtaskforce.org.

² Center for Children's Law and Policy et al. (2020). Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment. Available at: <https://www.mainejjtaskforce.org/>

³ See, [Youth Lockup Facility Transformed Into a Community Hub](#), Annie E. Casey Foundation (December 2023); [Repurposing Correctional Facilities to Strengthen Communities](#), The Sentencing Project (August 2022); [Can Closed Prisons Be Repurposed to Mend the Harm They've Done?](#), The Appeal (November 2022); [Transforming Closed Youth Prisons](#), The Urban Institute (June 2018).

⁴ [Oct. 16 meeting a pivotal step in redevelopment of 150-acre Sununu Center YDC property](#), Manchester News, October 14, 2025.

⁵ See Regional Care Teams, Place Matters Maine, Catherine Cutler Institute, USM. Available at: <https://placemattersmaine.org/regional-care-teams/>

⁶ See Maine: Youth Community Supervision Initiative: Transforming Youth Community Supervision Capstone Program. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/view/maine-tcs/maine?authuser=0>

continuum of care for justice-system involved youth, waitlists for community-based services and supports, and a lack of smaller, more therapeutic alternatives to secure care. Additionally, since the pandemic, the average daily population in Long Creek has doubled and efforts to decarcerate girls have stalled. LD 1923 provides the opportunity to reignite an inclusive, comprehensive, data-informed conversation about how to better allocate state tax dollars to improve both youth well-being and public safety.

And, the timing couldn't be better as the state works to implement the U.S. Department of Justice settlement agreement designed, in part, to remedy the unnecessary segregation of children with mental health and/or developmental disabilities in psychiatric hospitals, residential treatment facilities, and at Long Creek Youth Development Center.⁷ Similar to findings in the 2020 system assessment, the DOJ investigation found that "Maine does not ensure access to the community-based services it offers, resulting in needless institutionalization and risk of such institutionalization." The subsequent settlement agreement along with the 2020 assessment recommendations provide the building blocks for the work group to assess how to best utilize the facility and property to meet gaps in the continuum and support the terms of the settlement agreement. It is an opportunity to shift from an adult-like model of corrections to one that is smaller, more trauma-informed, more humane, and more reflective of and responsive to principles of adolescent development.

This is critical youth and child well-being work as the negative impacts of any justice system involvement on youth from formal system processing to confinement are well-documented. Rather than providing a public safety benefit, formal system processing often has the opposite result: youth who have had some justice system involvement are more likely to reoffend than those who were effectively diverted from the system.⁸ Re-offense rates are similarly higher for those youth who are confined as compared to those who are diverted or managed in the community.⁹

Adjudicating and incarcerating our children does not make us safer and is, in fact, contributing to a variety of other harms, including increased risk of abuse and trauma, harm to families, and negative developmental and educational impacts; all at a higher cost with worse outcomes than community-based alternatives. The failures of incarceration are well-documented and is summarized below:

⁷ The letter and press release are available here: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-finds-maine-violation-ada-overinstitutionalization-children-disabilities>

⁸ Juvenile Justice Resource Hub, "Community-Based Alternatives: Key Issues," retrieved at: http://jjie.org/hub/community-based-alternatives/key-issues/#_edn6; citing Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and Sarah Guckenburg, "Formal System Processing of Juveniles: Effects on Delinquency," Campbell Systematic Reviews (January 29, 2010), 38. Available at <https://bit.ly/30md72U>. See also National Juvenile Justice Network, "Emerging Findings and Policy Implications from the Pathways to Desistance Study," (Washington, DC: 2012). <http://bit.ly/14jXkQI>.

⁹ Richard A. Mendel, "No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration" (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011), 10. Available at: <http://www.aecf.org/noplaceforkids> Also see Richard A. Mendel, "Less Cost, More Safety: Guiding Lights for Reform in Juvenile Justice," (Washington, DC: American Youth Policy Forum, 2001), 8, available at <http://bit.ly/1DtNfjz>, which states that studies of youth sent to large juvenile correctional institutions in the past 30 years have found a 50-70 percent recidivism rate within one to two years of release; James Austin, Kelly Dedel Johnson, and Ronald Weitzer, "Alternatives to the Secure Detention and Confinement of Juvenile Offenders" (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, September 2005).

- Ineffective. Studies routinely show that “residential placements generally fail to produce better outcomes than alternative sanctions, cost much more, and can actually increase reoffending for certain youth.”¹⁰ One of the most statistically sound and comprehensive studies from 2013, and updated in 2015, found that “incarceration as a juvenile increases the probability of recidivism as an adult by between 22 and 26 percent.”¹¹ Incarcerating youth interferes with the “aging out” of delinquency upon young adulthood by disrupting natural engagement with families, school, and work. As a result, incarcerated youth are 41% more likely to have entered adult prison by age 25. Alternatively, a 2019 study analyzed pretrial outcomes for 340 detained youths and 517 community-supervised youths and found that being placed in detention increased the likelihood of recidivism for low-risk youth by 28 percent within two years of release.¹² Another study found more than 8 out of 10 youth who had participated in a community-based program remained arrest free and 9 out-of-10 were at home after completing the program, at a cost that is a fraction of what it would have cost to incarcerate these youth.¹³ The findings highlight how high-need youth have been and can be safely and successfully supported in their homes with the help of intensive community-based programs.
- Breaks up families: Removing youth from their homes and communities and placing them in correctional settings disrupts the healthy psychological development of youth by disconnecting them from their parents or parent figures, from peers who model and value academic success and positive social behavior, and from participation in activities that require critical thinking and independent decision-making.¹⁴ Families are often too far away from a facility not included in the treatment plans for youth even though the research confirms that the most effective programs in juvenile justice draw on family strengths.¹⁵
- Interrupts education: Incarceration also puts kids further behind in school. Studies find that juvenile justice systems are failing to provide adequate, effective education¹⁶ and most youth do not return to school after release from secure custody.¹⁷
- Results in sicker adults: Youth incarceration also leads to poorer health and wellness outcomes as adults. Results of a study published in American Pediatrics found that “child incarceration independently predicted adult mobility limitations, adult

¹⁰ *Re-Examining Juvenile Incarceration High cost, poor outcomes spark shift to alternatives.* (April 2015) PEW Center of the States. The PEW Charitable Trusts. Available at: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2015/04/reexamining-juvenile-incarceration>.

¹¹ Anna Aizer and Joseph Doyle. *Juvenile Confinement, Human Capital, and Future Crime: Evidence from Randomly Assigned Judges*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics. 130 (April 2015).

¹² Ogle, Meghan R., and Jillian J. Turanovic. *Is getting tough with low-risk kids a good idea? The effect of failure to appear detention stays on juvenile recidivism*. Criminal Justice Policy Review 30, no. 4 (2019): 507-537.

¹³ *Safely Home: Reducing youth incarceration and achieving positive outcomes for high and complex need youth through effective community-based programs.* (June 2014). Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. Available at: <http://www.yapinc.org/Media/ArticleID/138/New-YAP-Juvenile-Justice-Report-Garners-National-Attention>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Family Comes First.* (2013) Washington, D.C.: Campaign for Youth Justice.

¹⁶ *Just Learning.* (2014). Atlanta, GA: Southern Education Fund.

¹⁷ *Juvenile Reentry.* (2014) Washington, D.C.: Federal Interagency Reentry Council. Available at: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Juveniles.pdf>.

depression and adult suicidal thoughts,” confirming the link between younger age at first incarceration and worse adult health.¹⁸

- **Expensive:** The average state cost for the secure confinement of a young person is approximately \$588 per day, or \$214,620 per year.¹⁹ Annually, it costs states billions per year to incarcerate children and youth. In Maine, estimates have been as high as \$250,000-\$300,000 per child. Money that could be spent on approaches that yield better outcomes.
- **Unsafe:** Youth face physical abuse, excessive use of force by facility staff, sexual abuse, over-reliance on isolation and restraints, staff on youth violence, and youth on youth violence in youth prisons.²⁰ U.S. Department of Justice surveys of committed youth have shown that youth fear being physically attacked, harmed by staff, and/or placed in solitary confinement as discipline.²¹ A Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report on incidents of sexual victimization in juvenile facilities found 1,263 substantiated incidents of sexual victimization perpetrated by youth and 499 perpetrated by staff over a six-year period of 2013–18.²² Lawsuits against Long Creek, news reports like the one in today’s Bangor Daily News²³, and some of the first hand testimony from formerly incarcerated youth make clear that Maine is not immune to this trend.

In documenting the failure of the youth prison model, a report from the National Institutes of Justice summed it up best:

“The failure of youth prisons to help young people get back on track, as well as their failure to protect public safety, flows from inherent flaws in the model itself. Adult-style prisons that emphasize confinement and control are devoid of the essentials required for healthy adolescent development — engaged adults focused on their development, a peer group that models prosocial behavior, opportunities for academic success, and activities that contribute to developing decision-making and critical thinking skills. At the same time, these facilities provide too many of the elements that exacerbate the trauma that most confined youth have already experienced and reinforce poor choices and impulsive behavior. Maltreatment is endemic and widespread.”²⁴

With a capacity of more than 160, Long Creek Youth Development Center was built at a time when the country incorrectly thought youth crime was going to explode and knew far

¹⁸ Barnet, E. et al. (April 2019). *What Is the Relationship Between Incarceration of Children and Adult Health Outcomes?* American Pediatrics. Volume 19, Issue 3, Pages 342–350.

¹⁹ *Sticker Shock 2020: The Cost of Youth Incarceration.* (July 2020). Justice Policy Institute. Washington, D.C. Available at: http://www.justicepolicy.org/uploads/justicepolicy/documents/Sticker_Shock_2020.pdf

²⁰ *Maltreatment in Youth in U.S. Correctional Facilities.* (2015). Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Available at: <https://www.aecf.org/resources/maltreatment-of-youth-in-us-juvenile-corrections-facilities>.

²¹ *Conditions of Confinement: Findings from the survey of youth in residential placement.* (2010). Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227729.pdf>.

²² *Substantiated Incidents of Sexual Victimization Reported by Juvenile Justice Authorities, 2013–2018* (2023). Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available at: <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/substantiated-incidents-sexual-victimization-reported-juvenile-justice>

²³ [A longtime guard allegedly assaulted a 16-year-old at Maine’s youth prison](#), Bangor Daily News (January 12, 2026).

²⁴ McCarthy, P., Schiraldi, V., and Shark, M. (2016). *The Future of Youth Justice: A Community-Based Alternative to the Youth Prison Model. New Thinking in Community Corrections* (October 2016). National Institute of Justice, Harvard Kennedy School. Available at: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250142.pdf>.

less about the harms of incarceration. We now know more about what is proven to support youth and promote public safety. LD 1923 provides the opportunity to apply that knowledge, to stop doing things that cause harm, and to do more to invest in an effective continuum of care for youth.

Respectfully submitted,



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