

Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

Testimony of Whitney Parrish

Maine Women's Lobby

In opposition to LD 1723

An Act To Allow the Confinement of Female Prisoners at the Long Creek Youth Development Center

May 29, 2019

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety: my name is Whitney Parrish, Director of Policy and Program for the Maine Women's Lobby. The Maine Women's Lobby is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, statewide membership organization devoted to raising the economic, social, and political status of Maine's 678,000 women and girls.

I am here to speak to you in opposition to LD 1723, *An Act To Allow the Confinement of Female Prisoners at the Long Creek Youth Development Center*.

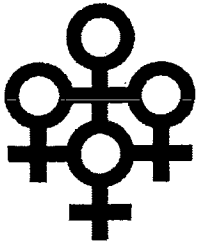
While we agree that incarcerated Maine women should have access to safe housing and the services they need, we do not believe that creating new beds is the answer to this crisis. We are deeply concerned about the reasons why so many Maine women, particularly mothers and caregivers being separated from their families, are becoming incarcerated at such a rapid rate. The repercussions of not addressing the underlying reasons why women are becoming incarcerated are profound and not only affect the incarcerated women, but their families and children. It is often said by incarcerated people that they are not the ones suffering behind bars—it's the people they left on the outside who are suffering the most.

Many, if not the majority, of Maine women who are incarcerated are there for drug and theft related crimes, largely fueled by substance use disorder, mental health challenges and trauma, crimes of poverty and desperation, and domestic violence-related convictions where they were likely not the predominant aggressor. We hear about women who stole groceries for their children, or were forced to hold or traffic drugs for their abusive partners. We hear about incarcerated mothers who are now unable to care for their children—children who, by the trauma they experience due to the incarceration of a parent or primary caregiver,¹ are at increased risk of entering the system themselves and dealing with lifelong health and economic security challenges. It should also be noted that many of these mothers are the primary caregiver to their children, placing a heavy burden on extended family members and the child protective and foster care system. We believe that the best long-term solution is to reduce reliance on

¹ Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children? October 2015. Accessed at <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015-42ParentsBehindBars.pdf>

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imprisonment as a sanction for some categories of criminal behavior, many of which are reasons why so many Maine women find themselves incarcerated.

To fully address this situation, we must fully reckon with the reality that the impacts to incarcerated women and their families have a ripple effect on our communities. Incarceration affects entire families, teachers, day care and health care providers—the impact knows no bounds. There is lost opportunity for incarcerated women who are ready to reenter the world to rebuild their relationships with their children and restore the dignity and respect they long for and often find through employment and engaging their communities.

Building more beds without getting to the underlying root causes of our incarceration crisis is not a sustainable solution. It does not solve the public health crisis that is fueling convictions across the state. Until we connect the dots between the lack of a compassionate approach to drug policy reform and incarcerating some of our most vulnerable citizens, we will continue to find ourselves with resource and space dilemmas, and we will continue to fuel the trauma that impacts and damages Maine children for the rest of their lives. We urge you to vote Ought Not to Pass on LD 1723. Thank you for your time.