

# Maine PRISONER ADVOCACY Coalition



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**Testimony in favor of LD 178  
to the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety  
March 13, 2023**

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Peter Lehman and I live in Thomaston. I am a formerly incarcerated citizen and a person in long-term recovery.\* I am testifying on behalf of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition whose goal is to promote restorative practices in order to increase public safety and the health of our community.

I am also a sociologist specializing in criminology and the vice chair of the Maine Prisoner Reentry Network. ALL of this background leads me to support this bill and urge you to find a way to reinstitute parole.

In 1983, my colleagues and I published research on the abolition of parole sponsored by the National Institute of Justice. We found that abolishing parole in 1976 increased the number of people in prison because abolition:

1. increased the length of incarceration and
2. increased disparity in time served.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, we observed the initial destruction of the Department of Corrections, and its regression into a Department of Prisons—to a department of merely custody and control. And an increase in recidivism.

I have continued to observe this over the past 40 years.

A Department of **Corrections** is focused on the future—it is focused on making changes, correcting problems, so that prisoners return to the community as healthier and more productive citizens.

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<sup>1</sup> Anspach, Lehman and Kramer, Maine Rejects Indeterminacy, 1983, National Institute of Justice. These have continued to be the consequences over the last 45 years.

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\* In the interest of honesty and disclosure, a personal background statement is available on request.

That was a vision shared by both staff and inmates before 1976. An important engine of that vision was parole.

Without that vision and unifying purpose, the Department sunk into lethargy and stagnation.

Commissioner Liberty used to say “I’m in the business of redemption.” Now he says it less—did he say it at all when he briefed your committee this year? I suspect he is tired.

My experience working extensively with reentry shows me that **successful reentry** from prison needs to begin on day one—on the very first day of incarceration—to take advantage of this **opportunity** for change. Parole is a key to making this happen.

These are some of the reasons that by 1979, the Department of Corrections was actively pushing for reinstatement of parole. Because abolition didn’t work! Parole did.

The Department has been trying to use the promise of Supervised Community Confinement as a substitute engine for change, but it is a poor and limited substitute and, ironically, generally excludes those most in need of incentive for change.

We believe there are four compelling reasons to re-institute parole in Maine:

1. Parole provides both an incentive and a reward for those who do their work, who work hard to change the habits of thinking and acting that led them to prison.

Treatment and other programs in prison DO make a difference. They can have a significant effect on the likelihood that a person comes back and a significant effect on their ability to successfully reintegrate into society and become a productive part of Maine society. It also saves us money.

2. Parole will save us money by getting people out of prison. According to the MDOC, a prisoner costs us more than \$78,000 per year. So parole could be a budgetary bonanza. There are states that have developed programs that have slashed their inmate populations by almost half in the last decade. New York is an example. We could do that.<sup>2</sup>
3. Parole savings will give us money to intensively supervise and assist parolees. Let’s say that we invested some of our savings in enough highly skilled and effective probation/parole officers so we could reduce their caseloads to 15 or 20. Think of what

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<sup>2</sup> We recognize that \$78,000 is not an incremental cost and releasing one prisoner will not automatically save us \$78,000. But the more we release the more actual savings we will realize. Thus, releasing 20 prisoners may actually net us close to or more than the \$1,000,000. That’s real money to reinvest.

we could do with our community supervision programs with the savings from even one of those people being released.

Intensive supervision and reentry assistance work. They reduce re-offending. That reduces victimization and reduces cost.

4. Low caseloads would allow probation/parole officers to be more effective in assisting reentry and reducing recidivism. Remember that each person who doesn't come back saves us even more—saves us more than \$78,000 each and every year. Remember that many more than half of people released come back now. If we could effectively reduce this we would save a lot of money.

So investing in supervision and assistance—**investing in reentry**—is an incredibly cost-effective approach.

We could also take some of that savings from reinstituting parole and invest it in correctional programs in our prisons and jails. For example, we have excellent substance abuse counselors at our institutions but far too few of them. The educational programs, including vocational programs, are good but they could be greatly strengthened.

As I said before, these programs work. They help us reduce the numbers that come back. And given the incentive of possible parole, we will be able to increase the numbers of people taking advantage of these programs. We will also create leverage to hold them more accountable for their performance.

The arguments against parole seem to come down to the fact that we will make mistakes. We will. Inevitably, we will parole a few who should not be paroled and who re-offend. BUT, fewer than we do now! Just because something isn't perfect doesn't mean it doesn't work.

Remember: these people are going to get out sometime. They are going to be back in our communities whether we institute parole or not. Whether we like it or not. Parole gives us a better chance to make that reentry successful and productive for both the inmate and for our society.

We urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 178.

Thank you very much for your attention and support.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.