

March 13, 2023

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

My name is Erika Arthur, and I am a resident of Freedom. I currently work as a policy analyst and my graduate work examined the history of U.S. criminal justice policy and its impact on people and communities. I am here today to express my whole-hearted support for LD 178 and the effort to re-establish parole in Maine.

I'm here because I have seen the evidence that parole works. More than that though, I'm here for my friend, Tiyo Attallah Salah-el, who served more than 40 years of a life without parole sentence in Pennsylvania. He called this kind of sentence "slow death row," and indeed, he died in prison at the age of 85.

Tiyo earned a bachelor's and a Master's degree while behind bars. He corresponded with people around the world, including prominent scholars. He was a published author, musician, activist, and lifelong, loving friend, which is how he signed his letters. When he found out that many of the men with whom he was incarcerated wanted to study for the GED exam but had no access to the materials and guidance they needed, he became a tutor and mentor. With the curriculum he developed, he helped dozens of people successfully pass the exam.

Tiyo was an amazing person, but he was and is in good company. Right here in Maine there are countless examples of people like Tiyo, people who pose the opposite of a threat to our communities. They are eager to contribute as teachers, artists, skilled workers, neighbors, and critically, as parents to their children and caretakers for their older family members. Imagine what would be possible if these individuals were back at home, instead of locked up for years and decades on end. Maine's families, communities, workforce, and economy have so much to gain. When we choose to stick with outdated, ineffective, and often cruel policies like the denial of parole, we foreclose those possibilities.

I can only imagine the kind of positive impact my friend Tiyo could have had on the outside, instead of incarcerated for longer than I have been alive. And I dream about what good could have come of the resources it took to confine him for all those years.

Establishing a fair and supportive parole system, one that honors the needs of those who have experienced harm, is a fiscally wise, just, and forward-looking move for the state of Maine. It is well past time for Maine's policymakers to recognize that a system that prioritizes redemption and reintegration is one that will move us toward true safety and well-being. Thank you for your work and for considering my testimony. I hope I can count on your support for LD 178.

Sincerely,

Erika Arthur

Freedom, Maine