

Members of the Committee,

My name is Thazra-Rosie Hylton and my baby brother, Leo Hylton, has been incarcerated at the Maine State Prison for the past 15 years. In the last decade & a half I have seen a lot of positive changes in MDOC; that gives me hope that my home state will keep the momentum going regarding this bill and restoring Parole. There are many people in Maine who will benefit from the right decisions being made after this committee hearing. I am most passionately concerned with one brilliant person whose growth and redemption are directly linked to that of our corrections department.

Leo Hylton was involved in a terrible crime 33 days after he turned 18. Nothing can change or excuse the fact of that, but a person is made up of more than the worst moment in their young life. I have watched him grow from being a sweet and curious child, to a troubled adolescent, to a caged criminal..then watched him evolve into a man of faith who is an inspiration to every person he encounters. Leo is not a violent person or a threat to anyone; he has a calming energy and people always feel safe and cared for around him. My brother had to survive several months in solitary confinement alone with his trauma and his thoughts before the prison started to evolve, and still he found his way back to God and started to heal. The biggest progress happened when he was able to start healing others through sharing his story, through countless hours spent volunteering in the MSP Hospice program, and by singing with his sweet strong voice that had been silenced for so long. He has never stopped his educational journey either-most recently earning his master's degree in Restorative Justice and will start gaining his PhD this Fall. Leo shares his love of learning by teaching a class at Colby College via zoom and lets his voice shine through a monthly column he writes for the Mainer. And while he is doing all of this (and more) to better himself and the world around him, he also makes time to mentor his nieces and nephews and be there to emotionally support our family through life's ups and downs. I frequently envision how much more he could accomplish from this side of the prison gates.

And while I'm so proud of all that he has become and hopeful about the future, I get scared thinking about the possibility of a dead end to this progress for all of us. I get discouraged when I think about the portion of my taxes used towards the \$76,000 it cost to keep Leo in prison last year and the portion of my heart that is locked in there with him. I just miss him; the whole community misses his physical presence. He is longed for in a way that I cannot properly describe.

Hope is all that we are asking for, and without bringing parole back to Maine, there is no hope for Leo and dozens of other men and women who have families like me that miss them in the same painful way. My mother would love nothing more than to have hope of hugging her baby boy as a free man, instead of being stuck with the fear of 35 more long years holding hands in the prison visiting room. To allow him to spend the rest of his sentence at home with our family, contributing to the community through teaching, mentorship, and counseling troubled youths seems like a more just and cost-effective option. Please look at the humanity of Maine's incarcerated citizens and their families and give us a chance to be whole again.