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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

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Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
LD 1514, An Act to Provide Safe, Short-term Housing to Individuals
Recently Released from Correctional Facilities
Before the Joint Select Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, I am Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 which is the Portland peninsula and I also have the distinct honor of serving as the Maine Speaker of the House. I am here today to present **LD 1514, An Act to Provide Safe, Short-term Housing to Individuals Recently Released from Correctional Facilities.**

This bill addresses a very serious problem, the lack of available and affordable housing for poor persons being released from Maine's correctional facilities. As you will hear today, the lack of housing upon release is a major cause of recidivism resulting in re-incarceration. If we establish a program and provide short-term transitional housing upon release, Maine will hopefully see a decrease in recidivism which both saves taxpayers from the costs associated with additional periods of incarceration and increases in the number of Mainers who successfully navigate the path from release to reentry into the larger society. Successful reentry greatly improves the lives of persons who have paid their debt to society while incarcerated. The ultimate goal of corrections is to see released persons thrive and become contributing members of our communities. LD 1514 can help us attain that goal.

LD 1514 directs the Department of Corrections to administer a program to provide transitional housing to recently released indigent clients of the Department of Corrections and establishes a fund to fund the program. Transitional housing would be available for the first two months following release. The bill also directs the Maine State Housing Authority to study long-term solutions for transitional housing for recently released indigent clients of the Department of Corrections. The Maine State Housing Authority is then required to submit a report on the conclusions of the study along with any recommended legislation to the joint standing committee of the Legislature having

District 118: Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine Campus

jurisdiction over labor and housing matters by December 4, 2024. The joint standing committee may then report out legislation based upon the report to the 132nd Legislature in 2025.

Persons released from correctional facilities face many challenges as they move from prison and transition into the larger community. Formerly incarcerated people often need to address health problems, find stable jobs, and learn new skills. However, before they do any of those things, they need a place to live.

Imagine trying to build a successful life without a place to call home. The reality is that this basic necessity is generally out of reach for formerly incarcerated people. The Prison Policy Initiative reported in 2018 that formerly incarcerated people are almost 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public. The mere fact of being homeless makes formerly incarcerated persons more likely to be arrested and incarcerated again. We should be doing everything that we can to promote successful reentry and prevent re-incarceration. Again, this reduces the financial burden placed on taxpayers that result from a return to jail or prison, and reduces the human suffering that leads a person back into confinement and out of the community.

A sufficient supply of affordable housing and supportive services can help people stabilize after their release from jail and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Policymakers, advocates, and persons in housing and criminal justice systems must work together to promote and evaluate housing strategies that divert people from the criminal justice system. Earlier this month, the Urban Institute's Housing Matters Initiative released research confirming that incarcerated people view having a stable place to live as critical to successful reentry. They also reported that the quality of reentry programs and reentry support services varies across the United States. The bottom line is that access to appropriate housing upon release from prison, coupled with services that would be available in the transitional housing envisioned in LD 1514, reduces the amount of time spent in prison due to recidivism. Given that, it is not at all surprising that the Maine County Commissioners Association has submitted testimony supporting "the goal of ensuring that incarcerated persons re-enter society as contributing and productive members and have safe housing upon their release from correctional facilities."

Later in this hearing you will hear from at least one person with lived experience. He successfully made the journey from prison to the community and became an outstanding contributing member of society. Pay attention to his experience and knowledge. He will share some of the challenges he faced, including finding housing. He will also talk about work being done in other places, notably, Tennessee where its Department of Correction has focused on locating and getting people about to be released

from its prisons into suitable housing. The program has been successful and Tennessee received a grant of \$200,000.00 last August to continue and expand its efforts. Maine can do the same thing while improving lives and strengthening of communities by advancing LD 1514.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.