

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1543

Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Recommend Cost-Effective, Safe, Administrable, and Healthful Programs to Reduce Violence in Prisons and Jails

Presented by Representative Moonen

Before the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee, April 25, 2023

Senator Bee-bee Center, Representative Salisbury and Members of the Criminal Justice and Public Affairs Committee, my name is Lani Graham. I am a former Chief Public health Officer for Maine. I serve on the Public Health Committee of the Maine Medical Association. I live in Freeport.

Everyone in this room must recognize the terrible challenge posed by confining people in limited spaces, all of whom have been convicted of some crime and many of whom also have illnesses such as substance use disorders or mental health diagnoses. Such an environment is tailor made for an outbreak of violence. I say “outbreak” deliberately because violence is like a virulent infectious disease. It spreads easily and rapidly from one person to another in confined areas with certain vulnerable people, such as those with mental health illnesses, trans people or others thought to be different, more likely to be affected and even die.

In October of 2021, one of the few truly bipartisan pieces of legislation of that year was passed. It was the Prison Camera Reform Act, a congressional bid to address violence in federal prisons. Assuring the “health and safety” of staff and residents was identified as the top rationale for the legislation.¹ It’s a good rationale to consider here in Maine as we contemplate the impacts of all forms of violence on those staff and residents involved.

Around the country people are becoming increasingly concerned about the danger violence poses to the incarcerated, their caretakers and the

¹ <https://www.grassley.senate.gov/news/news-releases/us-senate-passes-bipartisan-bill-to-reduce-violence-civil-rights-abuses-in-american-prisons>

communities to which they will return. This is a concern that Maine should share. In recent years data collection indicates that deaths are going up for those held in Maine prisons and jails. These deaths include an increase in suicides. There are reports of other forms of violence, which certainly should not be surprising given the challenges posed by the very fact of incarceration.

If we hope to ever have healthy people returning to our communities from prisons or jails, this issue must have top priority. Maine people are creative and inventive. Now would be a good time for Maine people to work together and come up with plans for violence elimination behind bars. This study Commission offers that opportunity.

As James Baldwin wrote in 1962: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed that is not faced". Violence in prisons and jails must be faced and if any state can do it, we can create that needed change.

I hope you will give this bill your unanimous support.

Thank you for your attention, I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.