



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: State Relay 711

Matt Moonen

53 Thomas Street #3

Portland, ME 04102

Matt.Moonen@legislature.maine.gov

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 Matt Moonen, Portland

April 25, 2023

Good afternoon, Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. I am pleased to present to you **LD 1543, Resolve, to Establish the Commission to Recommend Cost-effective, Safe, Administrable and Healthful Programs to Reduce Violence in Prisons and Jails** for your consideration.

While the daily news brings us stories of violent incidents in ordinary neighborhoods across the country, violence behind bars is out of sight for the average citizen and often overlooked or ignored.

This does not mean the violence in those settings does not impact people and life outside prisons and jails. The overwhelming majority of people in custody eventually return to life in our communities. It is our hope that they will return healthier and more capable of being good neighbors. We need them to. We all depend on the correctional system to make real and lasting positive change for incarcerated people. But the conditions that lead to violence in that environment clearly undermine that goal and threaten to make people less healthy and less ready to return to our communities.

Prisons and jails are inherently violent places due to the close quarters, the lack of privacy and the mix of people who are in custody. Nationwide, 19% of male prison residents say they have been assaulted by other residents, and 21% say they have been assaulted by staff.¹ And of course, this is just one kind of violence that occurs in prisons and jails. Violence against self, sexual predation, verbal abuse, and cultural abuse are other examples. Most significantly, 2022 saw a record number of deaths (21) in Maine's prisons and jails,² including a murder at Maine Correctional Center.³

To be clear, staff are impacted, too. Witnessing the physical manifestations of untreated health conditions, or of raw violence and its aftermath, would affect anyone. Research shows that the health

¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/06/attacks-and-assaults-behind-bars-cca-private-prisons/>

² <https://www.wmtw.com/article/records-circumstances-deaths-maines-jails-prisons/42399439>

³ <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2022/07/11/news/portland/man-accused-of-assault-that-left-windham-prison-inmate-dead/>

consequences of working in jails and prisons is substantial. A corrections officer's job was described as "a meat grinder."⁴ A 2021 paper⁵ analyzing the experiences of 156 correctional supervisors in a northeastern U.S. state revealed that large percentages witnessed or experienced the following traumatic events in a typical month:

- 55% – a suicide attempt by an incarcerated person
- 93% – violence inflicted by one incarcerated person on another

And in a typical year, many reported witnessing or experiencing:

- 61% – suicide of an incarcerated person
- 65% – non-suicide death of an incarcerated person
- 45% – a coworker suicide

We can do better than those grim statistics. When I was approached to sponsor this bill, I thought it was an excellent opportunity to face squarely the issue of violence in prisons and jails, because we all want the residents of these facilities and the staff who manage them to be safe. This resolve proposes to bring all parties with expertise together to understand when and why violence happens, what successful models are available to address it, and what programming best prepares people to successfully return to their communities.

I want to thank the Maine Department of Corrections, particularly Anna Black, for their collaboration on this bill. We are still talking and may have some language tweaks, but I appreciate everything they have done up to this point. We are fortunate to have a department that is committed to making improvements, and I know it is a herculean task to eliminate the conditions that make violence so common in prisons. I also recognize that DoC is not responsible for our jails, which are usually the first stop for those coming into custody and are not all the same in terms of space, staffing, and resources. The bill proposes that the Sheriffs be included on this commission to give voice to the issues they are facing every day.

I believe that significant progress could be made in addressing the issue of violence inside prisons and jails if Maine people with expertise worked collaboratively with people responsible for what goes on in those facilities. Best practices from around the world can be considered and perhaps adopted. I believe this cooperative effort could result in more cost-effective care, a better use of taxpayer dollars, and the release of healthier individuals returning to Maine communities.

I ask for your support and would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

⁴ https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/05/09/correctional_jobs/

⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354844622_Traumatic_Incidents_at_Work_Work-to-Family_Conflict_and_Depressive_Symptoms_Among_Correctional_Supervisors_The_Moderating_Role_of_Social_Support