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**Testimony in support of LD 244
to the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety**

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Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Peter Lehman and I live in Thomaston. I am a formerly incarcerated citizen and a person in long-term recovery.* In addition to my MPAC involvement, I am a founding member and Vice Chair of the Board of the Maine Reentry Network.

The first time I came to Thomaston, where I now live, I was in shackles enroute to the old prison in 1998. I had made serious mistakes, destroyed my life and those around me and was paying my debt to society. When I got out in 2003, I didn't have a place to live.

I have worked hard over the last 20 years to make sure that doesn't happen to my brothers and sisters I left inside. This has led me to help found MPAC and to help create the Maine Reentry Network.

The first week, I stayed on the couch of an AA member. Back then, we had furloughs to attend local AA meetings and as a result I had some community of support for my reentry. We no longer have that program.

Over the past few years, we have helped support over 350 men and women reentering our communities from prison and we have learned a lot about the challenges and strategies for success.

Housing is one of those challenges but NOT just because people need a place to live. People getting out of prison are making a BIG transition. They are moving from a highly structured environment of dependency to an unstructured environment of independency. The transition needs not just a roof but other supports.

This is why you heard Bruce Noddin emphasize the importance of peer support and working WITH, rather than providing FOR. And this is why the proposed structure of transitional group housing is so critical.

* In the interest of honesty and disclosure, a personal background statement is available on request.

Just last week in this room, Sherrif Polkey and I were talking about how enormous that transition is and the need for support. When we pick up residents released directly from the Warren Prison, we have them stand in the parking lot, holding onto the car, and look around. They haven't had that big a horizon in a long time and get dizzy.

And we try to go to a grocery store or WalMart with them to be there in support when they freeze up (and they all do), overwhelmed by sensory and choice overload. That's when they need company and support to literally get their feet on the ground.

Currently, the Department and its caseworkers do a LOT better job of preparing for reentry than they did when I got out. But their support stops at the gate. This bill proposes support beyond the gate, hopefully in conjunction with peer support from community organizations like MERN and MPAC.

Released prisoners have difficulty locating and affording available, independent housing in their communities for myriad reasons, including (1) incomes and work histories insufficient to rent and maintain independent housing, (2) formal policies inhibiting their ability to secure public housing, (3) long waiting lists for public housing, and (4) resistance by landlords to rent to them (see Roman and Travis, 2004 for a review).

Residential instability, including homelessness and frequent moves, is chronic in the months after release from prison. Some returnees are released to emergency shelters.

All this leads to a higher rate of **recidivism**—re-offending. Exactly the opposite of becoming productive members of our communities.

Recidivism costs a lot. New victims. New costs for law enforcement, court and more incarceration.

In conclusion, this bill proposes an **investment now** to save harm and money later.

I urge you to unanimously support LD 244.

Thank you for your attention. I am happy to answer any questions.

peter