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March 3, 2025

Testimony of Representative Suzanne Salisbury sponsoring
**LD 719, An Act to Amend the Share of State Funding for the
County Jail Operations Fund**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, I am Representative Sue Salisbury and I represent House District 128, which is part of Westbrook. I am pleased to present **LD 719, An Act to Amend the Share of State Funding for the County Jail Operations Fund**.

This bill fundamentally addresses the property tax burden on our constituents, of which county taxes are a major contributor. And of those county taxes, nearly half comes from the operation of county jails. Earlier this week, the State and Local Government Committee heard a bill to provide greater flexibility regarding when municipalities must pay their annual county taxes, and part of the reason for the bill is that county taxes have been increasing, which creates a significant burden on our municipalities and their residents. If passed, this bill would provide a measure of relief for our municipalities and local property taxpayers.

Our county jails do essential work as part of the state's criminal justice system, and as time has gone on, our jails have faced increased challenges as a result of the opioid epidemic and significant behavioral challenges of the residents in Maine's county jails. As others behind me can better attest, a significant number of residents are on some form of psychotropic medication, and many individuals need – and receive – some form of treatment for substance use disorder. This is extremely expensive, particularly given that inflation in the healthcare sector has far outstripped the inflation we have seen in the rest of our economy. That is partly why the Department of Corrections budget has increased substantially in recent years.

Which brings us to the reason for the bill before us. Two decades ago, Maine voters passed a citizen initiative at the ballot box, calling for the state to fund 55% of the required costs of operating our K-12 school districts. This measure was passed in part to provide relief to local property taxpayers, and in recent years, this Legislature has been able to fund this initiative from the voters.

As it relates to our county jails, which represent another significant cost to property taxpayers, there is no such directive. This is unfortunate for various reasons, including that our counties

operate jails not to meet their own needs, but rather to meet the needs of the state. Again, as others behind me can describe in greater detail, our county jails house individuals awaiting trial before state courts and individuals sentenced to terms under 9 months – by our state courts. Our county jails serve a significant population of Mainers, yet in recent years, state funding for county jails has only been around 20%. And in this biennial budget, state support is proposed to dip to 17% of the cost of running county jails.

The bill is modeled on our approach to school funding and would establish the goal that the state fund at 35% of the cost of operating our county jails, because it is my belief that 20% is just not enough.

Importantly, passing this bill represents a goal, but it would not bind future Legislature to meet the goal. Just as it took nearly two decades for the Legislature to meet the 55% goal for schools, there might be reasons the Legislature is unable to meet the 35% goal. But that doesn't mean the goal is unworkable or unrealistic.

Our constituents tell us repeatedly that the most burdensome tax they face is the property tax, and this bill is an effort to help relieve some of that burden in a clear and transparent manner.

Thank you for your time, I am happy to answer any questions you may have, but there are also people here that have more direct knowledge of this bill and country jails who might be able to answer better.