



Distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety committee,

My name is Norman Hightower I am writing on behalf of myself and Restorative Justice Project Maine, in regards to LD 740, a bill to establish comprehensive programming to divert youth from the criminal justice system and address their needs.

I was first incarcerated at the age of 12 and spent my 13th birthday in what was then the Maine Youth Center (what is now known as Longcreek). I had no violent charges and was held in custody due to a technical, curfew violation of my conditions of release. I was removed from my family despite the fierce objection of my mother. At the Youth Center I was introduced to an entirely different way of living. I witnessed and had a part in violence and rebellion the likes of which I had never seen before. I was placed in solitary confinement where I witnessed other kids with severe mental health problems harm themselves. That is a small snapshot of how it was in a State of Maine Youth Detention Facility when I was young. There was mistreatment between staff and residents, residents mistreated other residents and residents mistreated themselves. The incarcerated Juvenile population in Maine has decreased since then, but many of the same problems persist. I believe there's a strong argument to be made that when we expose children to these types of environments we are setting them up for failure. It was very difficult for me to get back into the world, go to school and live a normal life after having been removed from society and exposed to such harsh conditions. Even if a young person doesn't end up having the same traumatic experiences I did, just being away from a caring environment and locked behind closed doors under guard is damaging to that person's mental health and development. LD 740 mandates assessments of at-risk youth in order to get them much needed mental health and counseling services instead of locking them away. If these assessment and diversion programs were in place when I was young and got into trouble, things may have turned out different for me. I might have been given the help I needed to live a full and happy life, not a life full of incarceration. Instead I ended up in and out of prison for much of my adult life. This cycle is common among many people that I have been incarcerated with. We were incarcerated as juveniles and then spent much of our adult lives in prison. This cycle was not helpful for us, our families or society. Young people in Maine are perpetuating this cycle to this very day. If we don't break this cycle by finding ways to divert youth from the traditional justice system we can expect more of the same or worse.

RJP Maine is supporting this Bill because we believe in the restorative work we have been doing. Our Youth Harm Repair program uses restorative justice as an alternative path for young people who have been charged with crimes or are at risk of being charged with crimes, while still holding them accountable for their actions. We also highlight the voice and needs of the harmed party as well. 92% Of youth who participate in RJP Maine's harm repair program successfully complete their harm repair agreements. Research shows that this approach is more effective than traditional responses at preventing harm from happening again and achieving victim satisfaction.

Restorative Justice Project Maine

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Practicing restorative justice has helped me turn things around this late in my life. I urge you to give Maine's youth a chance to turn things around in their lives much sooner by supporting LD 740. Thank you for your time and careful consideration in this matter.

Sincerely, Norman Hightower

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