



Maine Sheriffs' Association

"One Team, One Mission"

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April 28, 2025

TESTIMONY OF SHERIFF JOEL MERRY MAINE SHERIFFS ASSOCIATION

LD 852 – An Act to Reduce the Property Tax Burden by Adequately Funding County Jail Operations

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Joel Merry. I am the sheriff of Sagadahoc County, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Sheriffs Association.

Your Maine sheriffs discussed this bill and voted unanimously to **SUPPORT** for LD 852 - An Act to Reduce the Property Tax Burden by Adequately Funding County Jail Operations.

The strategy to appropriately fund county and regional jails in Maine is revisited every session. Maine jails are chronically underfunded and when the jails are tasked with unfunded mandates, the burden of these shortfalls must be funded by the taxpayers of Maine.

When you compare state correctional budgets to county corrections budgets, there are some areas that are impacted equally. The rise in utility costs, personnel costs, and medical costs are impacting both state and county facilities and while MDOC receives an increase in funding for these cost drivers, Maine jails remain flat-funded. It's discouraging to see annual budget increases for state facilities while our jails are ignored during the budget process.

I was privileged to participate in the passage of LD 1654 during the 130th Legislature, which created the County Corrections Professional Standards Council in Title 5 to address jail standards and funding. One of the tasks assigned to the Council specifically addresses funding. The Council submits budget figures to the MDOC for inclusion in their budget yet year after year we are flat funded. We understand that Maine is navigating a critical revenue shortfall, however, we disagree that it negates the State's fiscal responsibility to the county taxpayers. LD 853 develops a method to ensure that counties are funded more appropriately in the future.

LD 853 also modifies the voice of the Council. As an advisory group to the Commissioner of Corrections, Council members meet every other week to discuss items that directly impact jail standards or financing. In 2024, the MDOC proposed rulemaking related to jail standards. The Council seats include two county commissioners, two sheriffs, one Maine Municipal representative, and two seats from the Dept. of Corrections. These meetings are open to the

public and we frequently include guest speakers. When the MDOC released proposed jail standard changes, the Council scrutinized each proposal and ascertained any that needed to be removed, modified, or included in the rulemaking. This was a months long endeavor incorporating professionals from around the State. Without completing this initiative, the MDOC moved forward, disregarding the work of the Council. We attended the rulemaking public hearing and submitted comments and concerns. Changes were implemented without acknowledging the months of findings we produced.

The Maine Sheriffs Association has provided administrative oversight of the Council since its inception. When LD 852 was introduced, we had yet to be funded for years of administrative support, despite Council members voting to fund the position of Clerk. We are pleased that we have recently received payment for last year and this current year of operations. LD 852 ensures stability and validation for the work of the Council.

We deeply appreciate the investment of our partners at the Maine Municipal Association for working on this bill. Maine sheriffs believe it addresses Council concerns and funding concerns appropriately and we urge members of this committee to vote Ought To Pass.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.