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Testimony of Representative Vicki Doudera presenting

**LD 1684, An Act to Exclude from Eligibility for a Community Confinement
Monitoring Program a Person Serving a Sentence
for Certain Domestic Violence Crimes**

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Good afternoon, Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Vicki Doudera and I represent House District 41, Camden and Rockport. I am here before you today to present **LD 1684, An Act to Exclude from Eligibility for a Community Confinement Monitoring Program a Person Serving a Sentence for Certain Domestic Violence Crimes**.

Two years ago, in the 131st Legislature, I came before this committee with *LD 692, An Act Regarding Eligibility for a Community Confinement Monitoring Program in a Correctional Facility*. That bill set limitations on when a sheriff may assign a county jail inmate serving a sentence for a crime against a family or household member to participate in a community confinement monitoring program. It required the jail administrator to determine that the inmate is not reasonably likely to pose a risk to the safety of others in the community. In making that determination, the jail administrator is required to, among other things, review and consider the results of an evidence-based risk assessment and the inmate's criminal history record. The bill also required a good faith attempt to notify the victim of the crime before and after assignment of the inmate to a community confinement monitoring program, because all too often that notification was not happening and domestic violence victims were caught unawares when their abusers were released.

That bill garnered support from this committee and the Legislature and became law with Governor Mills' signing that spring. I was asked to sponsor that bill by my constituent, Patrisha McLean, herself a domestic violence survivor and founder of Finding Our Voices. Patrisha convinced me that far too often community confinement was a "get out of jail free card" for abusers and that domestic violence victims were paying the price.

In September of 2024, Patrisha contacted me again. A young mom, Virginia Cookson, had been strangled to death in Bangor that week. Charged with the crime was a man who had been released from prison that February, three years early from a prison sentence for almost killing his ex-wife. His early release for good behavior was into the Supervised Community Confinement Program. This man met Virginia in April, and they started dating. On July 2, he was fully released from custody of the Maine Department of Corrections – despite a lengthy criminal history (his record was 44 pages long) going back to May of 1999, including felony charges that prohibited him from possessing guns.

The couple lived together for several months, but by fall the relationship was over. Just days before Cookson died, she told family that her ex-boyfriend showed up at her home and that he had recently threatened to kill her. Bangor police confirmed they had been called to both Cookson's home and workplace in the days before her death for incidents concerning her ex-boyfriend's behavior.

Virginia – or “Gin” as she was known – was 39 years old, a hardworking Nokomis graduate who had put herself through beauty and nursing school and was raising a young daughter. She was strangled in her home on Larkin Street in Bangor.

What happened here? Unfortunately it is an all-too familiar story, because domestic abusers are the ultimate bullies who hurt the ones they supposedly love.

Patrisha and I, this committee, this Legislature and the chief executive herself – we all thought we were solving a problem by putting guidelines and restrictions around the community confinement program. But the murder of Virginia Cookson and the traumatizing of countless others from abusers who are released back into the towns and neighborhoods and lives of their victims shows us that some people should not have the privilege of community confinement. Those who commit acts of domestic violence do not deserve this freedom and their victims do not deserve this terror.

LD 1684 seeks to right this wrong. The bill amends the provisions of law governing community confinement monitoring programs and supervised community confinement monitoring programs available to inmates of county jails and prisoners of the Department of Corrections. The bill provides that transfer to a community confinement monitoring program or supervised community confinement monitoring program is not available to an inmate or prisoner who is serving a sentence for domestic violence aggravated assault, domestic violence elevated aggravated assault or domestic violence elevated aggravated assault on a pregnant person.

The man who murdered Virginia Cookson terrorized and tried to kill his ex-wife and was supposed to be in prison until 2027. He was released in 2024 to terrorize another woman, and this time he succeeded in taking her life. It's time for us to admit that the community confinement monitoring programs in our jails and prisons are failing us. They are seriously flawed. As Patrisha McLean says, these programs do not confine and they do not monitor. Instead, they release dangerous criminals into the community with no thought about the safety of their victim and the general population.

I ask this committee to take steps to pass LD 1684 for the sake of Virginia and countless others.

Thank you.