

Maine PRISONER ADVOCACY Coalition



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Testimony in Support of **LD 1979** 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.* I am testifying on behalf of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition and our commitment to increasing public safety and community.

Earned time is an incentive for incarcerated men and women to **USE their time** and make something of themselves.

In talking about SCCP and Parole I tend to highlight the residents who have used their time to improve themselves, to pursue healing and education and increasing their social capital. This can mask the fact that **most residents don't**.

Prison generally is a negative place of despair and hopelessness. Of men and women simply “doing their time” and little else. In the words of the immortal Dr. Seuss, it is the dreaded and “most useless place. **The Waiting Place.**”

The negativity is overwhelming—the message of “what does it matter?” and “nothing can change” is relentless. And there is little else. Little incentive to change or to do anything.

The idea of earned time is to provide a concrete **incentive for change**.

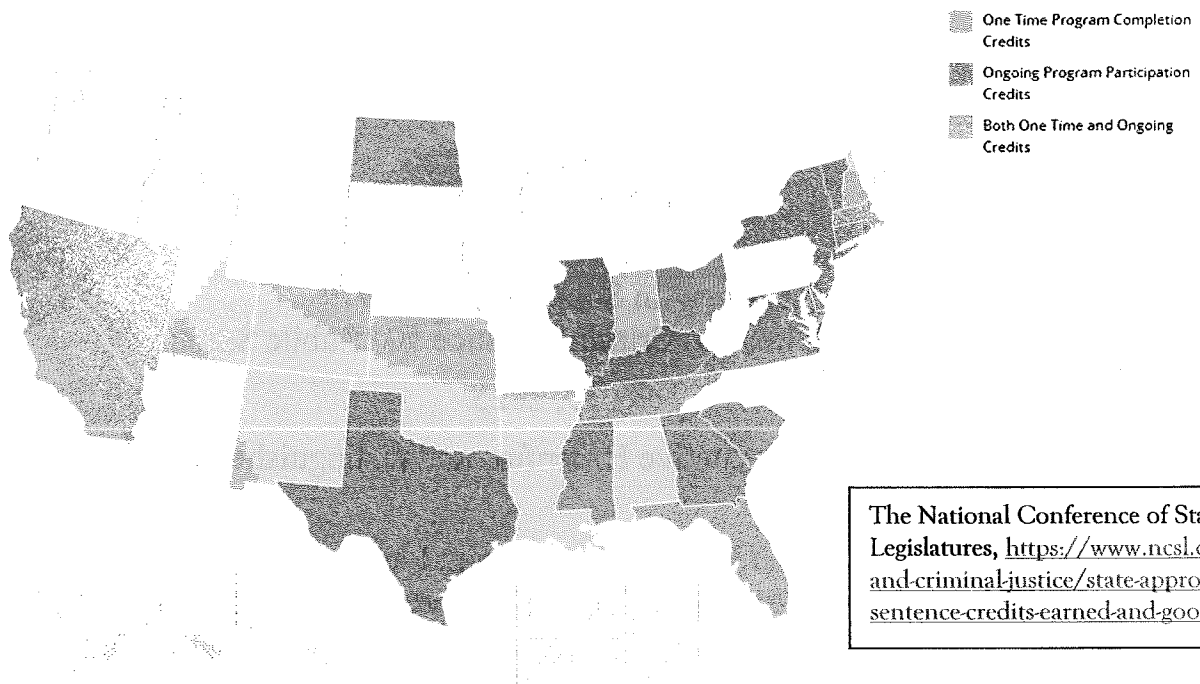
Most of these men and women will get out. They will rejoin our communities. But if nothing has changed, nothing has changed. We will have spent all that time and money for nothing.

I can tell you from experience that there is nothing sadder than when a brother comes back to prison. They got out and now they have come back. It's like seeing someone die of a preventable disease. It's a sadness that hurts. That aches.

And, sadly, some of those residents coming back mean **more victims**. That aches.

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

As shown on this map, most states have some sort of Earned Time credit as an incentive for completing programs, for USING this time to better yourself.



LD 1979 is a modest bill directing the MDOC to examine doing that here in Maine.

Perhaps the saddest part is that everything in most resident's lives has reinforced the negative and self-destructive prison messages and sense of hopelessness. For those whose experience of education has been red ink and shaming—of taunts about being stupid or dirty or hungry or different—even TRYING to get a GED is like a trip to the moon.

My own experience is that tutoring these bright, gifted men is 90% encouragement—convincing them that “you CAN do this.”

Those who have climbed their own personal mountain and used their time to get a GED or another degree or learn some skills are particularly sad to see others waste this opportunity and come back.

So at the prison there is a solid crew of peer recovery coaches and peer mentors trying to change the inmate culture and give support for change. To try to spread a message of hope and possibility to men who have little or no sense of either one.

If I had my way, one of these peer coaches would be talking to newbies the very first day in prison and challenging them with, “How are you going to take advantage of this time and opportunity?”

Trying to help them get unstuck—to get out of the waiting place.

That's what Earned Time is also trying to do. Let's take a look at it.

Thank you for your attention. I am glad to try to answer your questions.