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Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary  
State House Station 2  
Augusta, Me 04333

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### **Testimony of the Maine State Prison Branch of the NAACP**

In Support of LD 1962: An Act to Establish a Correction Ombudsman

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for your time this afternoon. The Maine State Prison Branch of the NAACP is submitting this testimony on behalf of its members and the people who are incarcerated in the Department of Corrections. Our mission is to protect the civil and human rights of all people inside Maine's correctional system.

We are here today because the Department of Corrections' Policy 29.1 — the grievance process — is not working, and the people in Maine's prisons have no meaningful path to justice when harm occurs. Policy 29.1 is supposed to provide a fair way to resolve complaints, but in practice it is not independent, not impartial, and not accountable. When the Department investigates its own actions, the outcome is predictable: grievances are dismissed, minimized, or ignored.

One example shows how unreasonable the system has become. Grievances are being thrown out simply because a resident wrote outside the lines on the form. That is not a matter of clarity — it is a matter of **denying access to justice**. Many incarcerated people have limited literacy, disabilities, or restricted access to writing tools. Rejecting a grievance because handwriting touched a margin outside the line, elevates form over substance, this sends a clear message: the Department is looking for reasons **not** to hear legitimate concerns.

We see the same pattern in more serious cases. Recently, residents at Maine State Prison were disciplined for violating a computer-use rule they were never informed of. When the NAACP filed a complaint, the Department dismissed the complaint by claiming proper notification had

occurred — even though no investigator ever spoke with the residents involved. A fair process would have required a basic interview. Instead, the grievance was closed based solely on the Department's own unverified statement.

These are not isolated incidents. They reflect a systemic failure in which the grievance process functions as a barrier rather than a safeguard. When the agency under scrutiny controls the complaint, the investigation, and the outcome, there is no real accountability.

That is why LD 1962 is essential. An independent Corrections Ombudsman would provide a confidential, impartial, and trustworthy avenue for people inside to report harm. It would ensure that grievances are evaluated based on facts, not formatting; on truth, not technicalities. And it would bring transparency to a system that desperately needs it.

For the NAACP, this is not a partisan issue. It is a matter of fairness, dignity, and basic justice. The people in Maine's prisons may be out of sight, but they are never outside the protection of their rights. LD 1962 is how we ensure those rights are upheld in practice, not just on paper.

**"A system that answers only to itself cannot be trusted. LD 1962 is how we restore that trust."**

Thank you,

Respectfully submitted,

Maine State Prison Branch of NAACP