

Testimony in support of LD 1962 to the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

January 7, 2026

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus and distinguished members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Johnson, and I am a Sanford resident writing in support of LD 1962, An Act to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman. I have 40 years of experience in manufacturing and 21 years working as an educator in the carceral system, including four years full time in a southwestern prison. My work has consistently shown that safety, efficiency, and improvement are driven by data.

Maine already uses Ombudsman offices to protect vulnerable populations, such as children and those in long-term care. Incarcerated people are also a vulnerable population. A Corrections Ombudsman would support the Department of Corrections mission to reduce harm through supportive intervention by providing independent, confidential investigations and recommendations. This office would improve safety, save money, and strengthen the Maine Model philosophy.

“Lawmakers are able to make more informed policy and funding decisions with insight provided by an oversight body that conducts routine inspections, investigates allegations of systemic problems, collects and analyzes data, reports its findings, and makes recommendations.¹”

Maine taxpayers have recently paid settlements in a number of lawsuits. Some of the settlements are:

- \$400,000 for a staff discrimination settlement

<https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/state/former-prison-guard-settles-discrimination-suit-against-dept-of-corrections-gender-sexual-orientation/97-afb516d0-efd3-4d59-a483-9d6e18711d3c>

- \$115,000 for excessive pepper spray

<https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/2023/jan/1/115000-settlement-excessive-pepper-spraying-maine-prisoner/>

- Unknown amount for use of solitary confinement that also resulted in policy changes

¹<https://famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Benefits-of-prison-oversight.pdf>

<https://www.mainepublic.org/courts-and-crime/2021-08-27/maine-man-held-nearly-2-years-in-isolation-wins-settlement-with-corrections-department>

- **\$225,000 for a wrongful death lawsuit of a teenager**

<https://www.pressherald.com/2021/12/23/suit-settled-over-trans-teens-suicide-at-detention-center/>

- **Medical treatment provided for people suffering from chronic hepatitis C**

<https://www.mainepublic.org/health/2020-10-01/maine-expands-chronic-hepatitis-c-treatment-for-prisoners-after-lawsuit-settlement>

- **Current lawsuit relating to rights violations during pregnancy**

<https://www.pressherald.com/2025/02/19/woman-sues-maine-corrections-department-for-violating-rights-during-pregnancy/>

A safe, independent Office of Ombuds could have prevented the issues that led to these lawsuits, saving tax dollars, staff time, and human suffering.

Regarding cost, the **Maine DOC is the largest recipient of any state agency of overtime pay**, receiving 26% of the state's overtime pay in 2024 while representing only 8% of state employees and regular wages.

		Regular Wages		Overtime			
2024 Data	Maine DOC	351,280,182.60		46,391,743.50			
	Total State Employees		16,732.00				
	MDOC Total	68,485,923.06		11,510,005.50			
	Total MDOC Employees		1,378.00				
	MDOC % of State Employees		8.24%				
Location		Total Regular Wages	% of MDOC Total	Total Overtime	% of MDOC OT	Employees	% of MDOC Employees
Central Office		16,147,267.96	23.58%	731,093.18	6.34%	257.00	18.65%
MCC		15,719,408.81	22.95%	2,936,695.29	25.47%	338.00	24.53%
Charleston		9,440,364.68	13.78%	1,759,875.99	15.26%	163.00	11.83%

	(MountainView)				%		
	Longcreek	6,419,430.95	9.37%	1,174,817.73	10.19%	186.00	13.50%
	MSP (and Bolduc)	19,736,308.41	28.82%	4,790,128.45	41.54%	416.00	30.19%
	Downeast	1,023,142.25	1.49%	138,357.89	1.20%	18.00	1.31%

DHHS had over 3 times the employees, but a much smaller percentage of overtime pay and an Ombudsman Office.

	Regular Wages	Overtime
2024 Data		
Maine Total	851,280,182.60	46,391,757.79
Total DHHS Employees	16,732.00	
MDOC Total	68,485,923.06	11,530,968.53
Total MDOC Employees	1,378.00	
MDOC % of Maine	8.05%	24.86%
MDOC % of State Employees		8.24%
DHHS Total	178,492,061.72	4,726,067.79
Total DHHS Employees	4,309.00	
DHHS % of Maine	20.97%	10.19%
DHHS % of State Employees		25.75%

Correctional Officers also suffer in an overworked and stressful environment. **“COs disproportionately experience higher rates of physical health problems**, such as chronic neck, back and knee injuries; heart disease; diabetes; high cholesterol; and hypertension, compared with crisis counselors and law enforcement personnel. **The mental and physical strain of the profession can lead to even graver consequences**. The suicide rate for COs is 39 percent higher than that of the general working-age population.”²

A work environment this stressful should be one with the least amount of overtime, not the most.

There are many reasons to support a law increasing transparency at Maine’s Department of Corrections. The DOC serves a vulnerable population under challenging conditions, and the Ombudsman Office is meant to support this work. High employee overtime and costly lawsuits divert taxpayer dollars from effective operations and programming. Greater transparency will benefit

² <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/risky-business-part-1-2-series-correctional-officer-wellness>

incarcerated people, DOC employees, and Maine communities. Have members of the committee had opportunities to speak directly with staff and incarcerated residents about policy concerns, health care access, or the grievance process? These conversations would provide valuable context in advance of the work session on LD1962.

I urge you to vote “Ought To Pass” on LD 1962.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sarah Johnson

Sanford, Maine.

<https://famm.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Benefits-of-prison-oversight.pdf>

<https://opencheckbook.maine.gov/transparency/index.html>

<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/risky-business-part-1-2-series-correctional-officer-wellness>