

Maine PRISONER ADVOCACY Coalition



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Testimony in support of LD 1962 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 whose goal is to promote restorative practices in order to increase public safety and the health of our community.

While I was in prison, I was a Counsel Substitute for more than 4 years. A Counsel Substitute is a resident (or designated staff member) who assists residents who have been written up for disciplinary infractions. Their duties included helping the prisoner understand the charges and navigate the disciplinary process and assisting the prisoner during the formal disciplinary hearing to ensure they receive a fair process, and ensuring the prisoner's rights were upheld according to departmental policy.

Back in those days, there was an “Office of Advocacy” in the DOC, with professional paid Inmate Advocate positions in the Department who trained and supervised the counsel substitutes. I was trained by the head Advocate working out of the DOC’s central office in Augusta and at Bolduc I was supervised by the Inmate Advocate, Anne Rourke, at MSP.

One reason for proposing an Ombudsman bill is that this “Office of Advocacy” and these Inmate Advocate positions no longer exist in the Department. But there is precedent for this sort of oversight in the DOC and in other Maine Departments.

Beyond the individual disciplinary cases, and individual grievances, the Office of Advocacy was in a position to see **patterns** of difficulties or concern.

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

What I am trying to tell you is that 25 years ago there was more oversight and inmate advocacy in the Department of Corrections than there is now. Not a lot, but some. And there is good precedent for having that oversight.

For all the talk of reform and enlightenment in the MDOC, there is **NO ONE** to ensure that processes are properly followed or that **patterns** of difficulty or unfairness (to residents or staff) are noted and dealt with.

While the system we had 25 years ago was better than nothing, it was not the unbiased, confidential program proposed in this bill, which could, at last, make a real difference in improving Maine's prison system.

Please vote to Establish the Corrections Ombudsman.

Thank you for your attention.

I am happy to try to answer any questions.