



January 12th, 2026

TO: The Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety

RE: Testimony Neither For Nor Against LD 1923: An Act to Repurpose Long Creek Youth Development Center and Build a Community System of Support.

Dear Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Hasenfus, and esteemed members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

My name is Olivia Eckert, I am a licensed social worker and program coordinator with the Young People's Caucus. Our mission is to connect Maine youth who have experienced the criminal-legal system to opportunities for their voices to be heard by decision-makers. I am here today testifying Neither For Nor Against LD 1923: An Act to Repurpose Long Creek Youth Development Center and Build a Community System of Support.

Most of the young people we work with have experienced a period of incarceration at Long Creek and have lived expertise that makes their voice valuable in these conversations. Today I speak on behalf of our Justice Network youth, where we have held conversations around this bill since its introduction last year. The Justice Network youth are energized around this conversation and hope that their voices can offer some perspective from those with direct experience in this facility. I want to highlight some of the themes from our conversations.

One of the first themes we heard from youth was a recognition of staff burnout and high turnover rates, which in turn had negative impacts on youth due to the inconsistency in relationships and limited staff capacity to respond to conflict. Some also voiced a desire for fewer locked doors, and less time being spent alone. There was concern that SMU, the Special Management Unit, was used less as a tool of rehabilitation and more as a way to compensate for skills that staff were not adequately trained in, such as de-escalation, conflict mediation, and holistic youth support. These are skills that the professionals listed in LD 1923 would bring to a restructured Long Creek. Youth are wondering if opportunities in LD 1923 for alternative programming might address some root causes that lead to staffing shortages and job retention to help alleviate these challenges.

Another theme we heard was an excitement about the possibility for alternative intervention strategies, such as residential housing or multisystemic and family-based therapy, which were written into the bill. When we first led conversations on this bill, youth were excited to dream about more consistent programming like furloughs with family, gardening and farming programs, opportunities to explore their creative interests like music, and expanded mentorship programs.



These dreams offer a friendly reminder that they are just kids who are trying to find their way in the world.

Our conversations were grounded in liberatory visioning. While there were some opportunities for grievances and shared experiences to be felt and heard, most of what our Justice Network worked on was dreaming up the future they wanted to see for Long Creek. This shows us that they deeply care about the future of the system and have strong ideas about what could and should happen. LD 1923 continues an important conversation around opportunities for Long Creek to provide sustainable mental health care for young people caught in system cycles. Investments in housing, behavioral health, diversion, substance use treatment, and case management for re-entry meet needs that our Justice Network are continuously identifying as crucial tools for their success. The working group proposed in the bill also provides a valuable opportunity for diverse voices and those with lived expertise to drive systems changes.

While the Young People's Caucus is neither for nor against this bill, we are excited to continue to be a bridge for the youth to engage with decision makers like yourselves and vision together.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Olivia Eckert, LMSW

Program Coordinator & Policy Analyst
Young People's Caucus (YPC)