

Dear Esteemed Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I write in strong support of **LD 1941 An Act to Implement Recommendations of the Commission to Examine Reestablishing Parole.**

My name is Catherine Besteman. I am Professor of Anthropology at Colby College, a co-founder of Healing First! (a survivor's collective) a member of Maine Restorative Justice Coalition, the Coordinator of Freedom & Captivity, and a board member of Reentry Sisters. I was also deeply involved with the 2023 founding of Parole-4-Maine and have published about Maine's criminal legal system in the Maine Law Review.

As I testified in 2023, Maine ranks near the bottom in many measurements of the success and fiscal responsibility of our criminal legal system. We are at the bottom nationwide with our approach to harsh, lengthy, and non-reducible sentences. Thirty-four other states have parole, and *all* other states except Maine, *including those that do not have parole*, have established legal pathways to reduce sentences and provide for early release through resentencing units and robust executive clemency. These pathways are designed to recognize rehabilitation, the problem of unnecessarily extreme sentences, long sentences given to young adults, compassionate release, and the exorbitant cost to taxpayers of keeping people in prison who do not need to be there. Maine is the *only* state in the entire country with none of these. (We do allow executive clemency, but since the 1976 criminal code revision it hasn't been used to recognize rehabilitation or release on geriatric grounds). We owe it to our taxpayers to do better.

In 2023, I offered testimony before the Parole Commission that was based in facts and figures about the comparative success of parole relative to straight release, the fantastic cost savings afforded by parole, and the need to correct the failures of the 1975 criminal code reform in Maine that eradicated parole, increased the length of sentences by half, expanded the number of things for which people could go to prison, lifted the cap on sentences for young adults, and increased the rate of incarceration by 90% in just over a decade. These facts and figures are an embarrassment to Maine, an abdication of our responsibility to taxpayers, and based in outdated, dangerous myths about the necessity of long prison sentences for ensuring public safety.

We are often told that survivors want harsh punishments for those who have harmed them, including long sentences, life sentences, and 'truth in sentencing'. We are told that such forms of punitive retribution will make us feel better, safer, healed. As a survivor of different forms of harm and a co-founder of Healing First!, I can tell you that survivors want a lot of things from our criminal legal system that they do not get, and that enacting punitive, vengeful forms of harm on people who have caused harm does *not*, in fact, lead to healing. For anyone. When I hear a complaint, such as that from Governor Mills, that reforms like parole do not take into consideration the experiences of victims, I take great exception. National survivors organizations are clear that our current system is not working for survivors and is, in fact, costing huge amounts of

money while causing more harm. It is simply not true that victims oppose parole or other kinds of reforms.

For me, I do not want to live in society that responds to harm with more harm in the form of punitive and lengthy prison sentences, dehumanizing environments, broken families, and lives lived out in despair. I do want to live in a society that responds to harm with pathways towards healing and repair, that offers ways for people who have caused harm to take responsibility and make amends, rather than rotting in some prison cell at my expense as a taxpayer. I want to know that people who have caused harm are able to take meaningful steps to reenter society as soon as possible, because we know that extended prison sentences are counter-productive, traumatically harmful, and super expensive. I want a parole bill that accepts the American Bar Association's guidance that sentences should be regularly reviewed, starting at ten years, because after that, for most people, long sentences serve no public safety function. I want a parole bill that recognizes that people can and do change, that offers a swift pathway toward back for those who have caused harm and support for those they have harmed, and that reduces the outrageous cost of incarceration by 90% for those who are released to corrections supervision in the community.

Maine needs to join the rest of the country to allow people who can demonstrate that they are rehabilitated, pose no threat to safety, and have a safe and supported reentry plan to return to their families and communities as productive and contributing citizens who will strengthen communities. Thank you.

Catherine Besteman
Portland Maine
Francis F. and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology
Colby College