

Maine PRISONER ADVOCACY Coalition



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Testimony in support of LD 271 to the Joint Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, February 22, 2021

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, distinguished members of the Committee.

My name is Peter Lehman. I live in Thomaston. I am a formerly incarcerated citizen and a person in long-term recovery.* I am here testifying on behalf of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition. Our goal is to promote restorative practices to increase public safety and the health of the community.

Support staff, maintenance and other nonsupervisory positions are the generally unseen and unsung people who play an enormous role in helping to accomplish these goals. Yet they are underpaid and underappreciated.

One result is that we fail to attract quality applicants. We miserably fail to retain young workers. The very omission which this bill attempts to rectify sent a powerful and destructive message, diminishing morale and helping to create staffing shortages, lockdowns and disruption of important programs.

And it gets worse. The more understaffed the prison is, the worse the job is for those officers and other workers who stay. They don't know when their shift will end because of mandated overtime. They know that this will harm the incarcerated residents who they are there to support and help. And they know that this will create more problems for the whole prison community.

Almost all of our incarcerated residents will come back into our communities. Corrections staff have a lot to do with whether they re-enter further damaged, traumatized and dangerous or whether they come back more healed and hopeful and striving for a different and better future.

Last winter and throughout the last legislative session, I said to you that one of our major challenges in Maine is the enormous and unnecessary human and financial cost of recidivism. When I spoke with you a few weeks ago with Bruce Noddin and MPRN, we said it again.

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

Recidivism clogs our courts, jails and prisons and causes new victims in our communities. The cost in human lives is incalculable.

Every day, corrections staff have the capacity to reduce recidivism.

Please think of this bill as an investment in reentry. We need to INVEST IN RE-ENTRY because we know that THIS investment will pay direct and immediate rewards when men and women don't come back. And we don't create more victims.

Thank you very much for your attention and support.