

Good Morning, members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Lisa Whitis. I live in Gorham. I work for the MDOC; however, I am not speaking on their behalf. To be clear, my testimony represents my opinion as a private citizen.

I am a teacher at the Maine Corrections Center (MCC). I received a BA and Master's degree from UMaine and a Juris Doctorate from the University of Tulsa. I have been at MCC since November 2018. Prior to this, I worked for the MDOE, The Children's Dyslexia Center (where I am currently on the Board of Governors), and as the Director of Legal Services for a Domestic Violence Agency in Oklahoma. As my work history suggests, I have been committed to serving underrepresented and marginalized individuals my entire adult life.

I chose to work in the prison because I am concerned about illiteracy rates in Maine and our country. According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) less than forty percent of the general population reads at or above the "proficient" level. Unfortunately, inmates have a disproportionately higher number of functionally illiterate individuals. This concerns me as the population of Maine ages and our workforce diminishes.

I would like to acknowledge the MDOC's commitment to the education of inmates, and their support for evidence-based educational interventions. Nevertheless, working in a prison is hazardous and stressful. These hazards and stressors do not differentiate based on job title.

The MDOC seeks to minimize these hazards through training and staff professional development. For example, as with all new hires, I was required to attend the Basic Corrections Training Program along with corrections officers and other support staff. This seven-week training program was held at the Maine State Prison and included classes such as: inmate supervision, communicable diseases and bloodborne pathogens, CPR and administering Narcan, and mechanical restraint and control. I even accompanied my fellow students into a confined space where we were fogged with pepper spray. Though not pleasant, this extensive training prepared me for work inside the Maine Corrections Center. I continue to participate in on-going trainings alongside corrections officers, caseworkers, and other staff.

Regardless of job title, security and safety is the priority. This requires vigilance from all members of the team. We all are the "eyes and ears" for our unit. Every day I am the sole supervisor of inmates in my classroom. Some of my students require more secure housing and are housed in a unit separate from the Women's Center. Most of the time, I escort inmates to and from the Women's Center through the garage, past the in-coming inmate reception area, to the more secure Multi-Purpose Unit where men and women are housed.

In preparation for this testimony, I asked other non-security co-workers about their stipend. There is a lot of variance among co-workers. It appears these stipends are randomly assigned with no discernable criteria for the differing amounts. In my unit, all non-security staff work with and among the prison population. Getting to our post requires walking through the prison

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yard or through the facility with the prison population. Non-security staff are not issued chemical spray or other protective/defensive items. Nevertheless, to reach the unit, I walk through the prison yard or through the facility unaccompanied. In our unit, all non-security staff works with and among the residents, so it is difficult to understand why some staff receive the stipend and so do not. We all face the same stressors and hazards; consequently, the stipends should be the same.

I thank you all for your work and for this opportunity to share with you today.