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Freedom

(Delivered in Person on March 24, 2021)

To the Committee Chair and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak, and thank you to Jan at the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition for inviting me to speak to this issue which is very important to me.

I grew up in southwest Vermont and I spent most of my adult life in California before moving to Maine in 2014. I have been extremely fortunate to have traveled the world and had many adventures and memorable experiences. One of the most memorable and impactful experiences of my life so far has been working in the volunteer hospice program at the Maine State Prison.

I found a job with the Maine Hospice Council when I first moved to Maine (I will note for the Committee that at this point it has been many years since I have been employed by or associated with the Hospice Council). I knew nothing about hospice or palliative care at the time but I have always been inspired by jobs that give me the opportunity to take deep dives into important issues and perhaps even make a difference in the world, no doubt why all of you choose to serve our great state of Maine, too.

Working with the inmates at the Maine State Prison gifted me the opportunity to wrestle with difficult concepts: Is the point of prison to punish or rehabilitate? What is the right way to treat people who have done wrong? Are people more than the worst thing that they ever did?

Every inmate is someone's sibling, parent, grandparent, child. Every inmate means or has meant something to someone on the outside.

In a 2001 study published by the National Institute of Justice, researchers found that being abused or neglected as a child increased the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 59 percent, as an adult by 28 percent, and for a violent crime by 30 percent.

Intellectually, we know that there is a cycle of violence that gets repeated and that this plays out in our criminal justice system over and over again. Abusers were very often abused themselves. I think that this is an important thing to remember when we consider how we should treat incarcerated individuals. It is easy to get caught up in the crime and the suffering of the victim, and it is easy to dehumanize the perpetrator. But I strongly believe that we should resist this instinct to dehumanize offenders and judge them only through the lens of the worst thing they ever did.

The state is in charge of incarcerated individuals; we hold all the power in terms of how they live, and in many instances how they grow old and die. When people face their end of life under conditions of incarceration, or have to attempt to navigate complex challenges related to their health or abilities while incarcerated, we have a choice whether to act compassionately or not. And the choice we make reflects on us, the people on the outside, and the people who are in charge of their incarcerated existence.

Pearl S. Buck once wrote that "Our society must make it right and possible for old people not to fear the young or be deserted by them, for the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members."

Incarcerated individuals are helpless, and by design they are deserted, separated from the outside world and its inhabitants. It reflects deeply on us as a society how we treat these people who are so vulnerable and so removed from the watchful eye of the greater community. For our own psyches, our own souls, whatever you believe to be our essential humanity, I think that we owe it to ourselves to care for vulnerable, incarcerated people and their health care needs, regardless of the crimes they have committed.

And so I urge you to pass LD 476, An Act to Provide Licensed Assisted Living and Nursing Facilities Levels of Care for Incarcerated Persons, into law. This simple

legislation (and I thank Representative Morales for her sponsorship of the bill) would go a long way towards proving our humanity to ourselves.

Thank you.