



Heidi E. Brooks

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Testimony introducing LD 963: An Act To Create Culturally Sensitive Treatment and Recovery Halfway Houses for Immigrants Transitioning out of the Juvenile Justice System

Good afternoon Senator Descambault, Representative Warren and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Heidi Brooks and I represent House District 61, part of Lewiston. I am here to introduce LD 963: An Act To Create Culturally Sensitive Treatment and Recovery Halfway Houses for Immigrants Transitioning out of the Juvenile Justice System.

We are facing a tremendous crisis in our community. Youth involved in the criminal justice system are having difficulty getting the help they need for necessary treatment of mental health issues and substance use disorders. Our immigrant youth are particularly vulnerable. Their families may be unfamiliar with the juvenile justice system. There are situations where their family is hesitant to have the children return home without additional treatment. This could lead to homelessness and being pressured into further illegal activity.

We need transitional housing, with resources for treatment of underlying health conditions. This bill also calls for connecting residents with resources for education and job opportunities. Children experiencing mental health or substance use disorders deserve access to these critical services. They could have a proven model of treatment and recovery, as this bill proposes, or they could fall deeper into the institutional and criminal path that they currently face.

We all need to feel like we belong. Being connected to family and our community is essential. It is challenging for children who are considered New Mainers even if they were born in the United States and their families. Language barriers and cultural differences put them in difficult positions, where they are unfamiliar with how medical treatment can transform the lives of their children in a positive direction. Incarceration, without appropriate treatment and reintegration services, often leave children, relatives and their support systems devastated.

On top of this crisis is the fact that our society has structural racism. We know that black, indigenous and people of color face discrimination and mass incarceration at rates higher than people who are considered white. Non-violent offences among New Mainers can lead to lifelong suffering for the children and their families and our community.

We have a responsibility as a State and Nation to treat everyone with respect and dignity. We are supposed to be a State that leads, dirigo. Children need access to medical treatment and a path forward, out of the criminal justice system. We are not serving our community without transitional, treatment-based opportunities.

Members of our New Mainer community will give you a much better account of what they have been experiencing. Some of their experiences have been truly heartbreaking. We need to do better.

I have had a request to allow some community members who are testifying in support of the bill to indicate if they only have a relatively brief amount of time off from other responsibilities. Please consider allowing them to testify earlier among the supporters' testimony.

District 61

Lewiston (part)

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I am the Sponsor of LD 963