

Testimony in support of LD 963

Senator Deschambeault, Representative Warren, Representative Brooks, honorable members of the committee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I am here to voice my support for [LD 963](#), “An Act To Create Culturally Sensitive Treatment and Recovery Halfway Houses for Immigrants Transitioning out of the Juvenile Justice System.” My name is Alice Cornwell and I am a resident of North Haven Maine.

Last year, I worked closely with the New Mainers Alliance, the sponsors of this bill, in their voter registration efforts. Going door to door registering New Mainers and providing voting information was inspiring and rewarding. In many of these encounters, I found myself speaking to adolescents or young children who stepped up to translate for their parents. Pride in these children shone from the eyes of parents and a sense of competence from the child able to interpret. But I could also imagine the immense challenges these young people face coming from families with little English or exposure to American culture and the fabric of life here. It is a potentially rich but not always easy task to bridge two cultures. And I can imagine the huge responsibility put on these kids.

If our voting system and sometimes even the act and right to vote is foreign, I can't imagine what it's like for these kids and families trying to navigate the state criminal and judicial system when one of these kids does something wrong and gets arrested and arraigned. Tragically, as a recent report by the Center for Children's Law and Policy found, a large percentage of youth sent to Long Creek, are there for minor misdemeanors that shouldn't require incarceration. Some are sent there because the court has found they don't have adequate supervision. Sometime, simply because they failed to show up for court. This should not be allowed to happen.

A recent study in Suffolk County Mass. has found that defendants whose minor misdemeanor charges are dropped were 58% less like to reoffend and return to court over a two year period. Numerous studies have shown that people incarcerated are more likely to be repeat offenders and are more likely to have substance abuse and mental health problems. It is increasingly recognized that the U.S. school to prison pipeline and the number of people, especially black and colored people locked up represents a national failure

We need to work together find solutions that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration rather than punishment and detention.

Small, culturally-sensitive Halfway Houses for immigrant kids transitioning out of the juvenile system is a common-sense step that focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. These Halfway Houses would allow kids to begin the road to recovery near their homes and families and communities and work to remove the stigma attached to kids in their local communities. These centers should provide linguistic and cultural translators and social work support for families. They should provide treatment for substance abuse and mental health problems, routes back into education, and job training and placement.

Eventually, all young offenders might be sent to small, community-based Halfway Houses focused on rehabilitation and the whole idea of juvenile detention centers and punishment might cease to exist. Of course, the state or committee in charge also needs to ensure proper funding and careful oversight for these houses. Bright, clean architecture and surroundings are important for self-respect. Opportunities to art, music, outdoor activities is also key. Empathetic and inspired leadership is important. An atmosphere where kids feel free to speak up is essential. Reviews are needed to protect kids from any abuse or coercion. As a recent editorial in Portland Press Herald points out “The possibility that these facilities will turn into mini-prisons is another reason that some advocates oppose the bill.” Proper resources, energy and care should be taken to make sure this does not happen. If the state redesigns the way it rehabilitates children, they should start with high standards and care.

New Mainers have made important contributions in their new home. Their role as essential workers especially in our healthcare system was highlighted during the Covid outbreak. Voter registration and helping people get to the polls was an important civic service New Mainers took on. It would be beneficial for everyone if the state joins hands with its New Mainer citizens to help redesign the way we look after our young people.

Reports cited: <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/04/04/our-view-bill-puts-the-end-of-long-creek-in-sight/>

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