

Sydney Avitia-Jacques  
Maine People's Housing Coalition

My name is Sydney Avitia-Jacques, I live in Portland, and I'm testifying on behalf of Maine People's Housing Coalition in support of LD 1668. People's Housing Coalition is an advocacy and mutual aid organization centered in greater Portland, Maine. Our mission is to destigmatize, decriminalize, and end homelessness. Our work is led by young people currently living in shelters, couch surfing, camping out or experiencing chronic housing insecurity.

We support LD 1668 because we know that youth incarceration is both a cause and an effect of homelessness. Incarceration and homelessness are two of the most challenging, draining, and traumatizing experiences any human being-- nonetheless a young person --can go through. Too many of Maine's youth have experienced both. As Mainers who want to see healthy futures for our youth, we must ask ourselves why.

I'll start with how homelessness directly leads to incarceration.

Young people act out because they lack basic needs and support structures or because they are reacting to direct harm and trauma. Most unhoused youth struggle with all of these realities simultaneously.

Young unhoused people of color are one of the most overpoliced, criminalized, and brutalized communities in our country, including Maine. Their daily struggle to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and safety bring them into regular contact with law enforcement. They receive criminal trespass orders for seeking shelter on public property or for experiencing a mental health crisis in the wrong place; their mere existence is made illegal. Minor infractions such as talking back to a shelter staff-person, when coupled with previous charges or probation orders, can quickly lead someone back into the uncaring arms of the carceral system.

A big part of PHC's work is our mutual aid program for emergency shelter. In April, we connected 8 families, including 15 children between the ages of 2 and 16 years old, with emergency short-term housing after they were denied access to homeless shelters and General Assistance. The number one reason that folks are barred from the family shelter or the teen center is because of Criminal Trespass Orders. PHC's mutual aid fund takes a couple families a week out of a situation where they are so desperate for shelter that they may get involved with an unsafe person or use substances to cope with the intense stress - but we are never able to support everyone, because our system has failed so many. And the criminal justice system is where you can find the people that we are not able to reach.

Think about it - a young person having a bad day talks back to a staff person - they are banned from the Teen Center for a full calendar year - they try couch surfing, staying with adults who may not have their safety in mind, they try holding down a job to qualify for a housing voucher but between getting zero sleep, keeping themselves safe, and figuring out where they're going to get their next meal they don't have the energy - a new level of desperation makes it only a matter of time before they act out, have a negative interaction with law enforcement and may end up in Longcreek because there is nowhere else for them to go. A 2019 report on Maine's juvenile justice system showed that 53% of detained youth in Long Creek are there because there was no community based residential program for the youth.

Shelters are themselves some of the most surveilled and policed places in our society, outside of jails, prisons, and detention centers.

Now let's talk about how incarceration leads to homelessness.

Housing discrimination: finding an apartment with a low-income housing voucher is extremely difficult. Waiting lists for specialized housing are frequently years long or simply non-existent, depending on where in the state, you live. Adding a criminal record to that application makes the odds nearly insurmountable.

Young people leave prison with more trauma, mental health challenges, and self-doubt than they entered with. These vulnerabilities make maintaining housing and employment, even when accessible, incredibly difficult.

Incarceration teaches young people that they are bad, unworthy of love and of resources, invisible, unhuman. Because of this, they can arrive at homelessness already accustomed to the brutal, discriminatory treatment unhoused people face and without the feelings of self-worth and love needed to face the incredible challenges of building a new life after incarceration.

In conclusion: Safe and stable housing, not punishment, is what allows young people to thrive despite difficult circumstances. We have the money and resources and we must focus on needs, services, and care, not punitive punishment. Long Creek is one hugely significant piece of a pipeline that leads underserved youth to homelessness to incarceration back to homelessness and on and on. We must break the cycle. We cannot continue to abandon our

young people. We must close Long Creek.