

Beatriz Beckford
MomsRising

Dear Governor Mills and members of the committee.

While Maine has decreased the number of youth committed to Long Creek Youth Prison since 2010, serious questions remain not only about the safety and efficacy of institutions like Long Creek, but also about what is happening with young people who don't end up in Long Creek.

Maine currently spends \$17 Million a year to incarcerate young people at the Long Creek Youth Prison. Maine's current youth incarceration system is a largely ineffective burden on taxpayers. Each year the state funnels millions of taxpayer dollars into youth prisons. This amounts to approximately \$250,000 each year to incarcerate each young person in a state youth prison. While conversely the state only spends approximately 13,000 to send a child to school each year. That is 19 times more spent on incarcerating young people versus educating them. Continuing to spend millions of dollars into youth incarceration is harmful and ineffective. By closing Long Creek Youth Prison, we have the opportunity to reinvest in a new model of youth justice that promotes healing and community well being.

The vision for a coordinated system of community-based, integrated services for youth across Maine has yet to be realized and is particularly problematic given the growing body of research that shows that incarceration doesn't make us safer, doesn't help young people grow into productive adults and can actually cause additional harm.

It's time to create the future of youth justice, by investing public dollars in a continuum of community-based alternatives to incarceration for Maine's young people.

We urge you to;

Close and repurpose Long Creek Youth Prison for affordable housing or a community center. Not a new prison facility for women or other community members;

Take the responsibility for youth justice and community reinvestment out of the Maine Department of Corrections and create a new cabinet-level agency to take responsibility for youth justice and community reinvestment;

Create a new model for small, community-based residential programs;

Fund programs to divert youth from arrest, prosecution, and incarceration;

Shut down the school-to-prison pipeline. An important way to end the school-to-prison pipeline is to end suspensions and expulsions;

Invest in credible messengers. A credible messenger is someone who can connect with young people and their families and is someone whose reputation commands respect in the community;

Reimagine the role of police. Police should not be the first responders in every situation in which youth and their families are in crisis. Furthermore, we should remove police officers from schools as there is no reliable data demonstrating that they keep schools safe. Rather investments in social emotional learning, teacher training and alternatives to suspension and other forms of school push out are consistently more effective.

Invest in Maine's communities. We must fix the root causes of why we, as young people, become involved in Maine's youth justice system. First, we must acknowledge that poverty and a lack of opportunity drive youth incarceration. We must transform communities so that all youth have the chance to thrive.

Now is the time, Governor Mills, to begin building a youth justice system that makes investments in all of our kids. We urge you to exercise bold leadership in both closing Long Creek and reforming Maine's juvenile justice system