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I am writing in support of LD 1668. I have been involved as a volunteer coach for the ultimate frisbee program at Long Creek Youth Development Center (LCYDC) for the past 5 years. I have been grateful for the opportunity to play alongside the youth -- to be a small part of encouraging the power of play and to see the skill development, confidence, and relationships grow through playing together. On more than one occasion, after playing in the field out back, residents have commented that it was nice, however briefly, to forget they were on the inside or suspend reality for just a bit.

The fact is, however, that being incarcerated as a youth in this state is not a reality that should exist. It is high time to reconsider our approach to supporting youth, in ways that exist within their communities, consider basic human needs, center trauma-informed approaches. And does not include incarceration.

I believe that LD 1668 is a big step in the right direction. The past approach has tried to put a band-aid on much bigger and deeper rooted issues, and is reactionary rather than proactive. Our community members need supports that address the root of many of the precipitating factors that land them in LCYDC -- not punishment. Consider the number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) experienced by the youth, the mental health diagnoses, the trauma history. Research shows us the kinds of supports that truly support youth with these experiences and it does not include incarceration. Reinvesting millions of dollars toward community-based supports and supports that center health and wellbeing, supportive housing, and employment opportunities addresses many root causes and demonstrates a marked shift from punitive to compassionate approaches.

Throughout my time in connection with LCYDC, I have encountered staff whose intentions I do believe are in the right place -- who have stayed after their work day is done to play alongside residents, who act as supportive role models while playing and not, and who advocate fiercely for opportunities to exist, like athletics, that offer positive engagement. However, there is a limit on what good intentions can do within a system itself that is broken. We need to look at the forest, not just the trees.

A world without youth prisons can (and should) exist. LD 1668 is a necessary step forward for seeing that possibility become a reality in Maine. Please join me in your support for centering our youth and paving the way for community-based supports that are reflective of the true needs. Thank you.