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Testimony of Representative Grayson Lookner Introducing LD 1668, "Resolve, To Develop a Plan To Close the Long Creek Youth Development Center and Redirect Funding to Community Integration Services for Adjudicated Youth"

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Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and honorable colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Grayson Lookner, and I represent the neighborhoods of Libbytown, Nason's Corner, Rosemont, and Stroudwater in Portland. I'm here to introduce LD 1668, "Resolve, To Develop a Plan To Close the Long Creek Youth Development Center and Redirect Funding to Community Integration Services for Adjudicated Youth."

I worked for a period of time with youth experiencing homelessness and substance use disorder. That experience taught me that we do not prioritize caring for youth who cannot count on their families or support networks to care for them. The program was acutely underfunded, and it was these young people who suffered because of it. I also learned that young people are not criminals – they act out of desperation and need understanding, support, and help; not condemnation, punishment, and a long stay in a traumatic lock-down environment.

Currently, there are twenty-seven young people currently incarcerated in Long Creek Youth Development Center, which has an annual operating budget of \$18.6 million, which means we are spending nearly \$700,000 a year on each young person locked up in the facility. While we should not spare any expense in providing for the youth of our state, most of us can agree that for that amount, we can be doing a lot better for those 27 individuals and many others.

That amount of spending has not mitigated or reduced the fact that Long Creek has been a place of violence and trauma for young people for too long. In 2016, a transgender young person with unmet mental health needs killed himself in Long Creek. Charles Maze Knowles should be alive today.

Nor has that spending mitigated the extremely disproportionate impact that Maine's Criminal Justice system has on youth of color. Black Mainers represent 1.6% of our state's population, and yet nearly a full quarter (23%) of the youth in Long Creek are black. That is an astounding, and frankly shameful fact for which there is no other explanation than institutional racism.

In 2019, the Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment & Reinvestment Task Force was convened and was made up of legislators on this committee. In the concluding report of the Task Force, produced by the Children's Center for Law and Policy, we learned that 53% of the youth who were detained in Long Creek were there for the state to "provide physical care." 69% of youth in Long Creek received behavioral health services from MaineCare in the year prior to their

commitment. Let that sink in. More than half of the residents of Long Creek are there because we cannot find a safer, more appropriate place to shelter and provide mental health treatment for them, largely because our state has systematically underfunded the necessary services.

Since the report was published, we have yet to see a comprehensive plan from the Department of Corrections about how to move forward with the recommendations, mainly that we must keep youth out of lock down facilities such as Long Creek. My bill proposes that we implement the report's recommendations and move forward with closing this antiquated system based on outdated thinking.

Children and young people have the right to care, education, and support by their communities. Those services are not specialties of Maine's Department of Corrections, and MDOC has demonstrated its inability to adequately provide for Maine's youth. The evidence is clear: a 2018 Department of Justice report found that nearly one-in-ten (9.1 percent) youth in Long Creek reported sexual victimization while under MDOC's control. Many youth leaving Long Creek report lingering mental health symptoms like depression and trauma, and sadly too many of them become acculturated to an institutionalized mentality, and too many end up recidivating and become residents of MDOC facilities in Adulthood. Additionally, MDOC did little to protect the young people incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to 12 Long Creek staffers testing positive for the virus. If we do not take urgent action to close Long Creek, youth will continue to suffer inside the facility, and carry that harm with them on the outside for the rest of their lives.

A recent poll found 59 percent of Mainers support closing existing and abstaining from building new youth prisons for a more individualized approach to youth justice, focused on each child's circumstances and needs, rather than immediately placing young people behind bars.

This bill directs the Maine Department of Corrections to create a plan to close Long Creek Youth Development Center by June 2023 and repurpose the facility to serve as a community center and supportive housing, instead of a place of trauma, harm and punishment.

The bill also calls for the divestment of \$18.6 million dollars from the Maine Department of Corrections budget and will create a Youth Justice Community Reinvestment Fund. By closing Long Creek and investing the \$18 million operating costs into a continuum of community care, such as job training, housing, and mental health treatment, we can invest in the future of our youth and our communities.

LD 1668 directs the Maine Department of Corrections to work with the Maine Department of Labor to initiate a just transition of workers into different employment. Many of the workers at Long Creek are qualified professionals who could serve the state in other capacities. Some workers would benefit from advancing their education. This bill does not leave the staff of Long Creek hanging out to dry. They will find new opportunities as we transition towards a more just model of helping our adjudicated youth.

A world without youth prisons, replaced by a community-based continuum of care for youth, can exist. New Hampshire has just closed its last remaining youth prison, and it's time for Maine to follow suit. It's time to close Long Creek and reinvest the operating budget into evidence based community resources for youth. We can listen to the young people who experienced Long Creek and end the ongoing traumatization of young people.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to working with you on this bill.