

To Whom it May Concern,

I am writing in support of LD 1588, and the importance of changing the stigmatizing language to those incarcerated and suffering with substance use disorder. As a woman in long term recovery from substance abuse disorder, and currently incarcerated, I can witness the harm that is caused when confronted with that language. When being referred to as a drug addict, criminal or inmate, among other things, it eventually begins to wear on self-worth and eventually we believe those things. Once believing those things about ourselves, we create inner-stigmas about ourselves. It deters the thrive to become more than that. After all, if others believe that about us, then it must be true right? WRONG! When we are made to feel less of a human because of a disease, or a mistake that we have made, it makes true recovery impossible to achieve. The hardest thing to overcome are the views that we have on ourselves. We lose our purpose, our confidence, and most of all our self-worth. It raises the question within ourselves, "why strive to be a better person when others will always look at me like I'm just a drug addict, or an inmate?" End result you believe that you can never be more than that. That is not a good feeling, it leaves a feeling of hopelessness and isolation. Although most of the staff here at the Southern Maine Women's Re-entry Center refer to us as residents, and treat us as we are, HUMAN, there are still a few that still refers to us as inmates, and drug addicts. That is a dehumanizing feeling. It makes me feel less than, and brings up the criminal addictive mind set of negative thinking patterns. Luckily for me, I am at a place in my recovery that I can turn those thoughts around and correct their language about who I am. That is not the case for all the women here though, I consistently see women struggle with their self-worth, causing disciplinary actions within the unit. Sometimes it only takes one person to speak to someone struggling like they are worth more than just being a drug addict or an inmate to turn those thoughts around and make recovery possible. It is said to us every day that we are here to rehabilitate, in order to help this process be successful we need to let go of the negative language that is used and bring out the positive. This needs to be put in place not only inside prison walls, but out in the communities as well because people are suffering with inner-stigma everywhere, not just inside these walls. We need to show people through language that they are somebody, and that they have supports that believe in them. Change is possible, let's make it happen, it could possibly save a life.

Today, I am a woman in long term recovery, a resident at a correctional facility, a mother, wife, college student, and most of all a human that deserves the support in my journey of recovery and rehabilitation. After all, we don't refer to someone who has a cancer diagnosis as "just a cancer patient" do we?

Sincerely,

Wendy Smith

Wendy Smith
Incarcerated at Maine Women's Reentry Center

This testimony was submitted on behalf of Wendy Smith by Courtney Allen.