

Cole Cochrane
Behavioral Health Community Collaborative
LD 696

Senator Deschambeault, Representative Warren and Members of the Criminal Justice and Safety Committee.

My name is Cole Cochrane and I am here on behalf of the Behavioral Health Community Collaborative in support of LD 696. The BHCC is a collaborative of seven non-profit community based mental health providers all over the state that, collectively, serve over 70% of the people who receive community mental health treatment.

We are here to join the many others who are urging you to ban solitary confinement in our corrections system. I am sure you are aware that the intersection between mental health, substance use disorder and our corrections system is way to common and very often people who need help and treatment are put behind bars instead with little or no support for their underlying issues. The BHCC is working hard with this legislature to try and right this imbalance and make sure that services are funded and available and to provide alternatives and crisis services that help people avoid going in appropriately to jail. Just as an illustration, there are currently only 87 full time mental health crisis workers in the state and there are over 2500 police officers. In addition, county sheriffs have shared that over 80% of people in county jails are on some kind of mental health medication. The problem is very widespread, and our corrections system has become the mental health "treatment" of last resort because our community systems are underfunded.

So, for those who are incarcerated because they don't have access to mental health or substance use disorder treatment, and who may act out due to those issues, solitary confinement will drive them into a deeper and more severe crisis. The thing they need most is services, support, and connection, not isolation and punishment. For many, the experience of solitary may be impossible to ever recover from, making a mockery of the word "corrections" and causing untold psychological harm.

From another perspective, people who are incarcerated for criminal behavior who are put in solitary confinement are very likely to develop severe mental health issues. Research shows that anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and psychosis are common results of even short-term solitary confinement. And in these cases, the system is creating more people who need services and, again, may not ever fully recover.

As you have heard there is much research showing the psychological and long-term harm of solitary confinement. We urge you to prohibit this practice in Maine as we work with you to ensure that there are appropriate services for people throughout the state.

Thank you for your consideration.

Members of the Collaborative are: The Opportunity Alliance, Spurwink, Sweetser, KidsPeace, Volunteers of America, Maine Chapter, Shalom House, Oxford County Mental Health Services, Gateway Community Services. Together we serve over 70 % of the people who receive community mental health services in Maine.