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Portland
LD 1552

Dear Senator Deschambaul, Representative Warren and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Laura Doroghazi and I am a resident of Portland ME Cumberland County. I am here to speak in support off LD 1552 An Act To Provide Reentry Services to Persons Reentering the Community after Incarceration.

I am a second year MSW student at the University of Southern Maine and my decision to pursue my graduate degree came from my experience of facilitating recovery meetings in jails and other locked facilities. The recidivism rate was disheartening, there were so many individuals I would see get released then be back a month later on a new charge or a probation violation. But even worse was the heartbreaking number of women who were part of the 636 Mainers who lost their lives to substance use disorder just last year. The adjusted rate for relative risk of death is 12.7 times higher the first two weeks after being released from incarceration, and drug overdose is the leading cause of those deaths.

I identify as being in recovery and belong to a 12-step fellowship. The beauty of these types of programs is in their simplicity. Any addict can get clean, lose the desire to use, and find a new way to live. That's what they help with - staying away from substances. They do not help with affordable housing, obtaining employment with a criminal record, or any of the other challenges that await someone reentering the community after incarceration. Peer support is great, but when you don't have somewhere to live and you're not sure where your next meal is coming from, going to meetings is suddenly a lot less important.

When I got clean from substances in 2016 I had a backlog of legal problems and around ten thousand dollars in medical debt from a couple of trips to the Emergency Department without health insurance. I also had parents who were able to help me out financially to pay for a sober house while I got my life together. Coming up with \$2,000 a month to pay for a program would have been unfeasible without their support. While there are some scholarships available, most sober houses do not accept insurance or General Assistance and many residents have to rely on family to pay their rent. Those who are not provided with these types of opportunities or assistance usually end up couch surfing and reenter the types of situations that led them to being arrested in the first place. Staying clean is difficult when everyone around you is using drugs.

While at the sober house several women were placed there on probation or deferred disposition. Having the privilege to witness how much these women have accomplished because they were given a solid foundation and the chance to make something of their lives is why I chose to offer testimony today. Not everyone needs a sober house, but most people would take advantage of case management services to help with securing housing, finding a job, or getting assistance with legal issues and medical debt. I have seen these women pursue careers, go back to school, be reunited with their family, and truly thrive despite their past experience with the Department of Corrections.

More people should be given these services. While facilitating recovery meetings I would ask repeat offenders what had brought them back. I heard one gentleman say, "I was released on a Friday evening into a snowbank. How was I supposed to do well?" It's frustrating that individuals are released with no aftercare plan, no services, no support and then the system acts surprised when they go back to the only options they have available.

According to the Maine Department of Corrections Return to Custody Report, the three-year recidivism rate is 30.3%, up from 24.7% four years ago. While still lower than the national average, we could be doing more. A recent Harvard study showed that with steady employment recidivism rates drop to the single digits. We need to help individuals with criminal backgrounds secure employment. The more assistance

individuals receive with reentry, the less likely they will be to return to the negative decisions that led them to be incarcerated in the first place - drug dealers don't do background checks.

Lack of secure housing can also contribute to recidivism. Many of the women that I worked with had a history of couch surfing. Some shared that their family was no longer willing to provide them with a place to stay because of their previous behavior, so they relied on the generosity of friends or were sometimes forced to pursue more desperate measures. Knowing that women are trafficked because they did not have access to affordable, safe housing should drive home the point how necessary these services are. Reentry programs and aftercare services prevent these types of atrocities and give Mainers an opportunity to not only do well, but thrive. I urge you to vote ought to pass for LD 1552