



February 18, 2022

Dear Senator Deschambeault, Representative Warren, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety;

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. For over forty years, the Maine Women's Lobby has advocated for gender-responsive and gender-equitable public policies, with a focus on those most affected by misogyny, sexism, and other forms of oppression. We support systems and proposals which increase the health, wellness, safety, and economic security of all people in Maine.

We are here today **in support of LD 1721, "An Act Regarding Conditions and Correctional Policies for Female Residents."** We thank Representative Talbot Ross for sponsoring this important bill.

This bill has several parts, but at its core it seeks to achieve two goals:

First: To create more gender equity in systems oriented toward men. In 2002, there were only 25 women in Maine's state prison. That number has grown almost ten times, to approximately 220 as of last year¹, and the number of women incarcerated at the county level has grown substantially as well. The substantial increase in incarcerated women has highlighted that they are living within systems that were largely created for (and frankly, by) men, with male-oriented defaults.

The expansion of people representing the needs of women in the Board of Visitors, and the establishment of a Board of Visitors for Women's Services, along with the acknowledgement that incarcerated women should be accompanied by female corrections officers, moves the needle significantly on this need.

Second: To support the caregiving and connection between incarcerated people and their children. Incarcerated women have substantially higher levels of lifetime trauma and of sexual and domestic violence than the general public. In many cases these experiences, or the resultant mental health needs or drug involvement that can stem from them, can already interrupt or challenge people's best efforts at parenting. Incarceration adds a further layer of harm to these families. In fact, we know that separation of a parent is one of the key early experiences that can negatively affect a child over the course of a lifetime. Carceral systems that create barriers between children and parents contribute to intergenerational trauma.

The improved visitation standards, along with the proposed annual report, will help to not only change practices, but provide oversight and accountability to ensure that we are continuing to monitor the real needs of caregivers and their children and families in Maine's carceral settings.

While we are in strong support of this bill and the improvements it offers, it does not replace the fact that we simply must start recognizing the intersection of trauma and substance use disorder, and how those issues combined with our public policy regarding drug use and possession have ensured that more women than ever before are being incarcerated in Maine. Incarceration is not a healing place for people with trauma or substance use disorder, and we simply must do better. I would rather spend our agency time advocating for increased access to trauma-focused services, mental health services, substance use treatment, and decreased criminal penalties for drug use and possession.

Still, until we collectively address the structural reasons that so many women are being incarcerated, we will advocate for correctional settings and services that are gender responsive and equitable across the state. LD 1721 seeks to continue our work toward that goal, and **we hope you will vote Ought to Pass on this bill.**

Thank you for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

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