

Dear Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and members of the Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety,

I am writing in support of LD 756 An Act Regarding Criminal Services for Juveniles.

I have been a volunteer with Long Creek Youth Development Center (LCYDC) since 2016, coaching and organizing opportunities among residents and community members to play ultimate frisbee. I have long maintained the belief that is backed by evidence that incarceration is never the right answer for supporting youth. I am hopeful that LD 756 will set into motion meaningful and necessary measures to transition away from incarceration and toward effective community-based supports.

It is long overdue for Maine to invest in proactive and ‘upstream’ measures to authentically support youth within their own communities. Funding for housing, peer-based models, restorative justice, healing and treatment, economic and vocational support, and gender and culturally responsive services (as LD 756 proposes) is critical. These approaches have been shown to better support justice-involved youth and their families, promote public safety, and disrupt pathways into incarceration.

Additionally, targeted and individualized support is necessary to effectively support youth who are already involved in the juvenile justice system. Individualized needs assessments, as proposed by LD 756, are crucial for understanding the specific circumstances and accurate needs of justice-involved youth, and create a roadmap for matching appropriate supports to the needs. Youth whose needs are being met are more likely to successfully transition out of the justice system and are less likely to reoffend.

Over the years, I have seen several different scenarios play out. On one hand, I have seen effective community based supports (housing, vocational, community role models, etc.) lead to meaningful community involvement and participation. On the other, which occurs much more often, I’ve seen youth continue to be involved in the system. It’s not a big leap to make to connect those dots back to insufficient community-based supports.

I have been passionate about volunteering at LCYDC to provide positive play-based opportunities via ultimate frisbee for movement, teamwork, conflict resolution, connections with adult role models, and simply fostering joy. While I (and many of the residents and community members) have thoroughly enjoyed these experiences, it is not lost on me that they are contained within a broken system. I do believe that there are others who truly want what is best for these youth and do what they can to support from within. It is my opinion that these efforts place small bandaids on a gaping wound. I hope that these experiences have had positive impacts on the youth who have participated, during and beyond their time at LCYDC, and I am also not naive

enough to believe that answers to authentic support lie within the current structure. It is time, long past time, to reimagine how we provide supports. It is time to move well beyond incarceration, and toward a continuum of care that fosters well-being and promotes safety through effective community-based approaches. I hope you will join me in supporting LD 756 to help us get there and effectively support youth in Maine.

Thank you,  
Caitlin O'Connell  
Portland, ME