

Esteemed Members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

Submitted by Catherine Besteman

My name is Catherine Besteman and I am here to testify in favor of LD 178. I offered testimony before the Parole Commission that was based in facts and figures about the comparative success of parole relative to straight release, the fantastic cost savings afforded by parole, and the need to correct the failures of the 1975 criminal code reform in Maine that eradicated parole, increased the length of sentences by half, expanded the number of things for which people could go to prison, lifted the cap on sentences for young adults, and increased the rate of incarceration by 90% in just over a decade.

Today I am speaking from a different position. I have experienced multiple forms of harm and yet I strongly support parole in the form of the supported and rehabilitative pathway to reentry laid out in LD 178. I have experienced burglary and robbery: my home was broken into and ransacked and I lost treasured family heirlooms. My car has been broken into many times, including in my own driveway. I have been robbed in person. I have experienced one assault, and I was caught in the middle of an armed confrontation where shots were being fired and a man was murdered just feet in front of me as I lay on the sidewalk on top of my young son, who I was shielding with my body.

When I hear a complaint, such as that from Governor Mills, that LD 178 does not take into consideration the experiences of victims, I wonder how she can say that. I do not want to be told how I am supposed to feel about the harms I have experienced, and I reject the implication that all victims feel the same way and that we are all opposed to parole. This is simply not true. There are many people here today who have been harmed by crime and yet who passionately support parole.

For me, I do not want to live in society that responds to harm with more harm in the form of punitive and lengthy prison sentences. I do want to live in a society that responds to harm with pathways towards healing and repair, that offers ways for people who have caused harm to take responsibility and make amends, rather than rotting in some prison cell at my expense as a taxpayer. I want to know that people who have caused harm are able to take meaningful steps to reenter society as soon as possible, because we know that extended prison sentences are counter-productive, traumatically harmful, and super expensive. I want a parole bill that accepts the American Bar Association's guidance that sentences should be regularly reviewed, starting at ten years, because after that, for most people, long sentences serve no public safety function. I want a parole bill that recognizes that people can and do change, that offers a swift pathway toward back for those who have caused harm and support for those they have harmed, and that reduces the outrageous cost of incarceration by 90% for those who are released to corrections supervision in the community. I want LD 178. Thank you.

Catherine Besteman
Portland
LD 178

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