

Testimony of Doug Dunbar from Hermon, Maine

In Support of LD 178
"An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community"

Public Hearing: March 13, 2023

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and Members of the Committee, my name is Doug Dunbar. As a formerly incarcerated person, I appreciate the opportunity to express strong support for LD 178.

Before going to jail in 2017, I spent nearly 30 years in government working in the Legislature and the Governor's office as John Baldacci press secretary. I was also John's communications director in the U.S. House of Representatives and worked in the U.S. Senate for George Mitchell. More recently, I served as Maine's Chief Deputy Secretary of State and handled legislative & media affairs for Maine's Department of Professional and Financial Regulation.

While in government, I paid little attention to our criminal legal system or who ends up in our jails and prisons. Until becoming incarcerated, I didn't understand how badly we've failed as a society. ***We created and perpetuate a criminal legal system that does only one thing consistently well—prepare people to remain entangled with courts, judges, jails and prisons.***

We've failed because we haven't understood or haven't cared why people fall short and end up in tiny locked cells. Like me, a strong majority suffer from one or more illnesses. Diseases of despair. A significant number are also plagued by homelessness.

In my case, I began self-medicating with alcohol in 2001 to deal with life-long concealed and tormenting mental illnesses (OCD and anxiety) that spiraled out of control on 9/11 when the terrorist attacks occurred and I was working on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Sick with a substance use disorder, I made a series of poor-choices, experienced six arrests, spent time in three Maine jails and now have two felonies on my record. Instead of going to prison, I was given the option of participating in the Penobscot County Treatment and Recovery Court. Too many people are not given this opportunity or another alternative.

During the past five years in recovery from addiction and mental illness, I've been working with individuals in jails, prisons and those recently released, and I've struggled to understand why we don't aggressively target the drivers of our excessive incarceration. If we want to reduce crime, enhance public safety, strengthen families and save tax dollars, we must focus much more on three things: ***health, housing and hope.***

We need far greater attention and resources directed at community-based substance use disorder treatment, mental health care, and a variety of affordable housing options. We need much greater use of diversion both pre and post arrest to lower the number of people who end up in jail. We need bail reform, so the poor are not disproportionately punished. We need to shorten the time individuals languish in jail.

And when people are imprisoned, we must ensure the focus is on health and personal growth. The paradigm must change from punishment to well-being. We need a wellness system. We should be investing far more in top quality treatment for SUD and co-occurring disorders, and educational

programming. If we don't want people to recidivate, we should make college or a vocational training program available to each and every resident.

Ultimately, residents of our prisons need more hope. The extinguishing of hope has remarkably detrimental consequences. Parole offers hope and increased incentives for individuals to work on their well-being and personal development.

You're in the enviable position of being able to make a difference by educating the public about why most people become incarcerated, and enhancing public safety through funding health, housing and tools like parole that offer hope.

We have done so many things terribly wrong in our criminal legal system for decades. And we continue to make those mistakes. But you can help our state in doing one thing better by supporting LD 178 and restoring parole. Thanks for your time and consideration of this testimony. If there are questions or additional information is desired, please contact me by e-mail (dougdubar@yahoo.com) or call (207) 299-5626.

Doug Dunbar
Hermon
LD 178

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