

Michael Alexa Pitts

Testimony for LD 178

March 13th, 2023 10:00 am

Criminal Justice Committee

Good morning members of the Criminal Justice Committee in Maine. My name is Michael Alexa Pitts and I am here to speak in support of LD 178, the Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration. I am speaking on behalf of my fiancé, Steven Matthew Clark, who has been incarcerated for 18 years.

Steven has worked hard to rehabilitate himself during his time in prison. He has earned an associate's degree, two bachelor's degrees, a master's degree, and is now starting a PhD program. He has also earned several professional certifications and has worked with over 1500 people as a volunteer, tutor, and mentor for those in recovery and reentry. I have personally met some of these people who met me for lunch when I came to visit Steven. Each one of them shared a similar story of how Steven helped them when they were in prison and how they are free because of the hours he worked with them.

Steven has made many connections with people who want to help him. I am one of them, I love Steven deeply, and I really want him home to build a life with him. We plan to start a non-profit organization together in the future to help incarcerated individuals and single mothers. What is beautiful is Steven's goal is to get out and help people using his lived experience of incarceration.

As the fiancé of Steven Matthew Clark, I would like to speak to the immense emotional toll that his incarceration has taken on both of us. It has been an incredibly difficult journey, filled with ups and downs, and we have had to navigate a wide range of challenges that many people may never have to face.

One of the most difficult aspects of this experience has been the physical distance between us. Steven and I have been together for two years, and during that time we have had to maintain our relationship through phone calls, letters, and occasional visits. This has been a significant strain on us both, as we have had to learn to communicate in new ways and find creative ways to maintain our connection.

Moreover, the constant stress of worrying about Steven's safety and well-being has taken a significant toll on me. As a partner, it is heartbreaking to know that he is behind bars, unable to fully participate in our lives together or provide for our future. It is also extremely challenging to see the emotional toll that his incarceration has taken on him, as he has had to adapt to the challenges of life behind bars and cope with the traumas of his past experiences.

This is not just a personal struggle, however. Steven's story is not unique, and the impact of mass incarceration on families and communities is well-documented. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, nearly 2.3 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States, and this has devastating effects on families, particularly those in low-income and marginalized communities. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience poverty, homelessness, and mental health issues, while spouses and partners of incarcerated individuals often face significant economic and emotional burdens.

As someone who has experienced the impact of incarceration firsthand, I am acutely aware of the need for change. I believe that reinstating parole in Maine would be a crucial step towards building a more just and equitable society, one that recognizes the humanity and potential of all people, regardless of their past mistakes. By providing a pathway for individuals to be released from prison and reintegrated into their communities, we can help to rebuild families and create a more hopeful future for all.

Research has shown that parole and reentry programs have a positive impact on reducing recidivism rates. According to a report by the National Institute of Justice, participation in reentry programs can reduce recidivism rates by up to 25%.

In Maine, the recidivism rate is high, with 41.3% of those released from prison returning within three years. Reinstating parole will provide individuals like Steven with the opportunity to demonstrate their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. It will also allow for a greater focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

Reentry programs and services such as job training, mental health services, and housing assistance can help individuals successfully transition back into their communities. Without parole, individuals are often released without any support, making it difficult for them to find employment and housing, resulting in a higher likelihood of recidivism.

As a society, we need to invest in the success of those who have been incarcerated, rather than writing them off as a lost cause. By reinstating parole, we can provide hope and a path to a better future for individuals like Steven who have worked hard to rehabilitate themselves and transform their lives. Steven is no longer a threat to society, I would argue he is a gift to society.

In conclusion, I urge you to support LD 178 and reinstate parole in Maine. Thank you for your time and consideration.