

Kyle Bennett
Bangor, Maine
LD 1779

Re: L.D. 1779, An Act to Develop a continuum of care for youth involved in the justice system and to develop alternatives for juveniles incarcerated in Long Creek Youth Development Center.

Dear Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and Members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Kyle Bennett and I am a youth steering committee member with Maine Youth Justice. I reside in Bangor Maine. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 1779.

I am testifying today because I was in Long Creek Youth Development Center (LCYDC) when I was 14 to 3 months after my 18th birthday. Long Creek did nothing but cause me trauma. I spent the majority of my time in the special management unit or in intake for weeks to months on end by myself. The staff didn't want to deal with the fact that I had severe mental health issues and complex trauma. Yes, I saw a therapist but it was only when she had time and it was about 2 times a month.

My first time being locked up my lawyer told me at 14 I was "a system failure". I was in foster care and had been in group homes, psych hospital stays and even days to weeks long stays in the ER when there were no beds available.

Group homes pressed charges. Had they wanted to work with me and my childhood trauma I wouldn't have ended up in Long Creek. My DHHS guardian even said I would be locked up until I was 18 because no foster home or group home will take me back. I was told even if I did work the program I still wouldn't be out until I was 18, so that I couldn't go back to Long creek but go to county jail. I was also told that no foster home would take a youth who had been incarcerated. Placing older teens is hard enough.

A lot of adults think when you turn 18 you get out. Some youth don't get out until their 21st birthday. And if they mess up while in Long creek when they are over 18, the youth has a very high chance of being bound over and put into the adult system. I saw how the youth to adult prison pipeline works with my own eyes.

It's not fair to youth to spend months to years in a prison getting very little help and a very poor education. No teachers would work with me with my learning gaps instead it's kinda one education fits all. It's very hard to learn while incarcerated cuz you're worried about getting jumped, or assaulted at any point. Not only that but being away from your family and community causes so much stress and anxiety on top of worrying if the judge is going to be nice enough to give you another chance. It's really hard and it's a lot of pressure on youth.

If we closed Long Creek we could turn it into public housing for youth. The housing would need to be therapeutic but also community based meaning they can still leave when they want or need to. If the city of Portland regained possession of the building we could transform this big place into a hub for youth to thrive and get services.

There could be trauma informed therapeutic groups, classes of various things including a life skills class, tutoring, mentoring, a place to sign up for MaineCare and food stamps, and receive trauma informed therapy from actual trained providers. A community garden. Just a place where kids can relax, access services and not have to worry about becoming incarcerated in a prison because they are actually receiving the care and support they need to become thriving members of society.

In summary, LD 1779 would end youth incarceration and create community based alternatives for youth that allow youth to be youth without the threat of being abused in a prison for years. Along with removing the money from DOC and actually creating funding for youth. The time is now to reinvest the tax dollars tied to youth incarceration and invest in the livelihood of Maine's young people.

For these reasons, I request this Committee to vote ought to pass on LD 1779.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kyle Bennett