

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, ESQ.

Ought to Pass - LD 931

**An Act to Expand the State's Workforce by Supporting  
the Transition from Incarceration to Employment**

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY

May 9, 2023

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice & Public Safety, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am the Policy Counsel at the ACLU of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil rights and civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support this bill.

Almost all people in Maine's jails and prisons will return to their communities. About one third of them will return to prison within a few years.<sup>1</sup> Joblessness is a major predictor of recidivism. Across the country, "formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27% — higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression."<sup>2</sup> Federal, state, and local legal restrictions block people with arrest and conviction records from getting jobs, housing and educational opportunities. These restrictions drive re-arrest and significantly contribute to high rates of re-incarceration. Ignoring reentry disregards the challenges people will face when they leave incarceration or supervision. Some of these challenges brought them into the criminal legal system in the first place: poverty, substance use disorders, mental health challenges, and co-occurring disorders.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Hirschhorn, *Maine corrections officials tout wholistic approach to addiction treatment after prison renovation*, WMTW, Sep. 21, 2022, <https://www.wmtw.com/article/maine-corrections-officials-tout-wholistic-approach-to-addiction-treatment-after-prison-renovation/41302529#> ("30% of Maine inmates return to custody after their release").

<sup>2</sup> Lucius Couloute and Daniel Kopf, *Out of Prison & Out of Work: Unemployment among formerly incarcerated people*, Prison Policy Institute, July 2018, available at <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html>

<sup>3</sup> Hirschhorn, *supra*, at 1 ("61% of Maine prison inmates . . . suffer from substance abuse disorder, 45% from opioid addiction.")

If enacted, this bill would direct the State Workforce Board to prepare a plan to expand workforce development programming for incarcerated people in Maine. This bill would also ensure that jails adopt seven recommendations of the Jail Navigator Focus Group on Transition/Reentry. Each of these recommendations would make jails more rehabilitative, more responsive to any mental health challenges that led to incarceration, and better stitch correctional facilities together with the Department of Health and Human Services. This bill will ensure that more formerly incarcerated people obtain gainful employment, suitable housing, and educational opportunities to build stability and find success after incarceration.

We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.