

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH
Former Chief Public Health Officer for Maine
Freeport, Maine

IN SUPPORT OF LD 1009

**Resolve, To Create a Health Care Ombudsman Position to Serve in
Maine's County Jails**

Presented by Representative Colleen Madigan

Before the Health and Human Services Committee: April 7, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and Members of the Committee. My name is Lani Graham. I am a family practice physician and former Chief Public Health officer for Maine. I also worked for a year in the Massachusetts prison system, so I have some understanding of the challenges posed for providing and receiving adequate health care within a correctional environment. I am active on the Maine Medical Association's Public Health Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I write to support the concept of an ombudsman position to serve in Maine's county jails.

Even though Maine's rate of incarceration is relatively low compared to other states, sadly, it has been trending upward since the early 1980's. And the number of Maine people held in county jails is much larger than incarceration rates might suggest as thousands cycle in and out of these facilities annually. Access to adequate health care in county jails is also a racial justice issue with black persons being incarcerated in Maine at a rate of 6:1. It is clear that incarceration in Maine as elsewhere disproportionately affects poor and black and brown people.

And anyone who reads the news, listens to the radio or watches television is aware that multiple health issues have been identified in county jails across Maine. There have been eleven suicides in Maine county jails in the last five years, including one less than a year ago. There have been several Covid outbreaks in county jails (York and Penobscot). And there

are plenty of other medical problems that affect incarcerated people. People in prisons and jails are disproportionately likely to have chronic health problems including diabetes, high blood pressure, and HIV, as well as substance use and mental health problems.

Medical staffing for jails is necessarily limited by resources. And working in a correctional environment is difficult, not well respected and does not pay well. This naturally impacts adequate health care.

It makes sense from both humanitarian and economic point of view to provide adequate care to those in county jails. The vast majority of these inmates will return to society within a few years. Adequate health care can make the difference between someone becoming a productive member of society and someone becoming a burden to all. And of course treating illnesses early and adequately is much less expensive.

Having an ombudsman could make a difference to the inmates, to the families and to the future of Maine. But it will be important to have an ombudsman who is qualified to consider both mental and physical health care as well as someone who is capable of being an independent observer.