

Sarah Mattox
Restorative Justice Project - Maine

Thank you Sen. Baldacci and Rep. Matlack and committeemembers for the opportunity to express strong support for LD 1034. My name is Sarah Mattox and I am here today representing a consortium of restorative justice practitioners and providers in the state.

The Great State of Maine is known for its independent citizens, caring communities and neighborly interactions. Around the edges of those admirable qualities, though, lie inequities and biases that are deep and long-standing. The scores of bills before the current legislative session that deal with criminal justice reform and racial and cultural awareness are responses to those lapses. Last year the Legislature created the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Maine Tribal Populations to both examine the disparities and make recommendations for ending them. The commission is a hugely important asset as Maine moves forward into a more diverse, aware and just world. Already, the commission has helped enact important legislation, notably LD 2, which requires certain bills before certain committees to include Racial Impact Statements. How are we to move forward on this life-changing mission unless we know the truth about what our long-held divisions have meant to those affected?

The Commission has worked hard over the past year as it begins to define its mission and develop a strategy for achieving it. Perhaps because of the pandemic that so rattled our confidence in the future last spring, the commission was not funded in the state budget. That oversight is corrected in LD 1034, which would provide \$495,000 to hire three staff with specific responsibilities. The commission has important work to do and a strong Ought to Pass recommendation from the State and Local Government Committee will help ensure its approval by the entire Legislature. The existence of disparities in opportunities and outcomes for people of color in Maine are both real and damaging to the social fabric. We know that the Wabanaki people preceded the current white majority in Maine by thousands of years; that our black residents came initially as slaves commandeered by some of our leading citizens; that other immigrants of color in more recent times have experienced bias and exclusion that fly in the face of the Maine we treasure, the Maine of independent citizens, caring communities and neighborly interactions.

We do many things right in Maine. And when we recognize that we have slipped up, we have shown an admirable inclination to change. The Permanent Commission is part of that process. The Legislature wisely saw the need for change in the way we govern our racial, indigenous and tribal populations and created a carefully crafted vehicle for leading us there. That's a big job, and the three positions that will be funded through LD1034 are essential to its success. A core value of the Restorative Justice community in Maine is equity. We believe justice is best served when it is based in the community, using the best qualities of our citizens to repair the harm done by crime and division. The Judiciary Committee will soon begin work on LD 1226, which directs the Permanent Commission to study Restorative Justice programs across the country and make legislative recommendations to further the work of restorative justice this fall. We, the leading Restorative Justice organizations in the state, are united in our support for both LD 1034 and LD 1226, which will help us evolve in accordance with the best qualities of Maine people. We urge this committee to join us by voting Ought to Pass on LD 1034.

Respectfully submitted,
Portland Center for Restorative Justice
Maine Youth Court
Restorative Justice Institute of Maine
Downeast Restorative Justice
Restorative Justice Project - Maine