

Testimony in Support of LD 546
Implementing Recommendations for Juvenile
Justice System Improvements
Presented by Cushman Anthony
March 26, 2021

Senator Deschambeault, Representative Warren, and members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, my name is Cushman Anthony, and I live in Yarmouth. I am a retired lawyer and mediator. I was a member of the House of Representatives from 1986 to 1992, and was House Chair of the Select Committee on Corrections during the 115th Legislature.

I am speaking today on behalf of the Maine Council of Churches, an ecumenical partnership of seven mainline Protestant denominations in Maine with a combined total of 437 local congregations and 55,000 members. We are here in support of LD 546, An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Maine Juvenile Justice System Assessment and Reinvestment Task Force.

The juvenile justice system has been in need of improvement for a long time. In the words of the 2018 report subtitled "Blueprint for Helping Maine's Youth Succeed," "Study after study details the consequences when adolescents don't get the help they need, including unwanted pregnancies, involvement in the adult criminal justice system, poor educational outcomes, unemployment and increased dependence on government benefits." We owe it to our youth, as well as to our taxpayers, to provide for appropriate support services to our young people.

For a long time we have been sending troubled youth to the Long Creek Youth Development Center because of a lack of appropriate resources in the community to assist them. Thankfully, the number of young people committed and detained at Long Creek has dropped from 136 in 2010 to 39 in 2019. But that is still too many. And it is also way too expensive. The budget for maintaining Long Creek was \$18.5 million in 2020-21, to care for those 39 youth. Do the math. We can do far better.

The blueprint for a better system was set forth in a report issued a year ago entitled the Maine Juvenile System Assessment and Reinvestment Task Force. This bill seeks to begin implementation of the recommendations contained in that report, and directs the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group to oversee that process.

More specifically, this bill calls for the Juvenile Justice Advisory Group to work with the Department of Corrections, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other stakeholders to identify and begin the development of a community-based system of strategic interventions that will reduce the rates of detention in the juvenile justice system. It even asks those entities to identify possible locations for justice-involved youth detention and confinement, in small, secure therapeutic residences for youth. It also appropriates funds to the Departments of Corrections and Human Services to provide ongoing funding for such community-based programs.

In the words of one teenager, “Some people need a push. Some people need a hand up. You’re not given an instruction manual as young people on how to live your life. We make mistakes. But our mistakes should not define our future.”

In our view, passage of this bill, and implementation of the recommendations contained in the System Assessment and Reinvestment Task Force, would begin that hand up. As caring adults, we should do no less. Please vote Ought to Pass on this legislative proposal. Thank you.