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AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1400
MAINE RELAY 711

Valli D. Geiger

1 Green Way
Rockland, ME 04841
Valli.Geiger@legislature.maine.gov
Cell: (207) 956-1565

Public Testimony on LD 148: An Act to Allow Detention of Juveniles for Certain Acts -

Good Morning Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and esteemed members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee. My name is Valli Geiger, I am the Representative for District 42: Rockland, most of Owls Head and the islands of North Haven, Matinicus, Crie Haven, and the Muscle Ridge. I come before you today to speak in neither opposition nor support for LD 148.

Maine has a prison for children, Long Creek, who have committed violent crimes. Last session we ended the practice of sending juveniles to this prison for misdemeanors or because they were homeless. But we put nothing in its place. There is nothing for those lost and traumatized children showing up in our community, starting down the road to criminal activity and substance use.

As many of you have heard, my community has been particularly effected. It started with three early teens who ran away from their foster families and found each other. The group has grown to about eleven. These are children who have known years of trauma: physical and sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, removal from their homes, mostly due to parents with severe addictions. As they began to act out at school, the library, the Recreation Center, and the park, they discovered the consequences were minimal: arrest, a few hours at the courthouse and released back into the custody of DHHS and back with their friend group within hours. This realization has led to increasing and more serious crimes: Many of this group are young teenage girls who steal alcohol and offer it and their bodies to older men for a place to sleep at night.

THE STATUS QUO IS INTOLERABLE. But so is going back. It is time to commit to thinking outside the box. We need to move to a therapeutic lens for these deeply troubled kids, putting programming under DHHS rather than the Department of Corrections. Long Creek's intake unit, could hold children for 1-2 weeks, during which a thorough assessment is made of their needs. Their disposition would be based on that needs assessment: back to their community with strong support such as the old ACT Teams used to provide or if they are acting out, committing crimes, involved with substances, Kid's Peace could be an option. This state has resources available NOW: Kids Peace is a large residential campus in Ellsworth, used for treating children with severe autism and those with behavioral health problems. They have several empty buildings due to the difficulty of finding staff. The state could contract and partner with Kid's Peace to open one of their buildings for these kids. They could open another building to provide housing for young social workers, psychologists, teachers and counselors. Over time we could build regional group homes with strong therapeutic support. Other states are experimenting to good effect with programs like Trekker's, Outward Bound, providing kids with positive experiences with positive role models for mentors.

While we build a better system, using Long Creek for teens committing misdemeanors or who are homeless must be a temporary solution. They must not be housed or commingled with kids who have committed more serious crimes.

We spend \$600,000 a year, per child, to house 30 children in Long Creek. It costs \$78,000, annually to house an adult in the Warren prison. Can we really do no better than this? Is our plan to keep children at Long Creek until 18, then house them for decades in the state prison system? We have the resources to do better. With Maine's aging population and acute labor force crisis, we cannot simply throw these kids away if there is an opportunity to help them onto a better path.