

A Restorative Pathway to Decarceration and Abolition

By Catherine Besteman and Leo Hylton

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“**Abolition**” means different things to different people. To us, abolition is a process of working towards a society that prioritizes the healing of trauma, creating strong community bonds, investing in services and resources people need to live a healthy and dignified life, confronting and dismantling systems of oppression, and responding to harm with practices and processes of accountability and justice. Abolition means putting in place the support structures and harm remediation systems that would make prisons and jails obsolete while making society safer and healthier. In short, abolition is a pathway to decarceration that works toward closing prisons and jails. It is based on building an entirely new society that invests in safety and security for everyone.

What does safety and security look like?

It looks like affordable housing, healthcare, and education for all. It looks like robust community centers with before- and after-school programming for kids. It looks like a society willing to confront the abuses of the past by acknowledging and repairing contemporary inequalities that are rooted in histories of slavery, colonial land appropriation from indigenous communities, and sexism. It looks like schools as spaces of safety and intellectual risk taking where kids are free to pursue the ideas that excite them, to question authority, and to develop the emotional and interpersonal skills they will need as adults. It looks like jobs that pay a fair wage and controls on corporate greed. It looks like Substance Use Disorder (SUD) interventions that help rather than criminalize those who struggle with addiction. It looks like forms of intervention that interrupt intergenerational cycles of domestic violence and sexual violence through healing and rehabilitation. And it looks like ameliorating the gaping inequality that has led to widespread impoverishment for the majority while affording excessive wealth accumulation for the few.

What will this vision actually require in practice?

We know the United States is the world's jailer, with 5% of the global population and 25% of the world's prisoners (Cullen, 2017). We know that the U.S. incarcerates a disproportionately high number of people of color, with Black people incarcerated at 5 times the rate of white people (Nellis, 2016), and that the rate of female incarceration has skyrocketed in the past two decades, primarily due to crimes related to drug use and possession (Herring, 2020). We know that changes in the law, and not rising crime rates, drove the 222% increase in the rate of incarceration in state prisons between 1980 and 2010 (Travis et al., 2014). Nationally, in 1974 the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that 1 in 20 adults would experience some form of incarceration each year (Bonczar & Beck, 1997). By 2001 the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that one in three Black men, one in six Latino men, and one in seventeen white men would go to prison during their lifetimes, and that the rate of going to prison for women had increased by a factor six between 1974 and 2001 (Bonczar, 2003). Every second person in the U.S. has had a close relative incarcerated (*Every Second*, n.d.).

Prison sentences in the U.S. are far longer, on average, than in all other countries (Kazemian, 2022; Widra & Herring, 2021). We have one of the highest recidivism (return to incarceration) rates in the world (Benecchi, 2021). We are one of the only countries on earth that sentences people to ‘Death By Incarceration’ (life sentences without the possibility of parole), holding 80% of the people serving Life Without Parole sentences in the entire world (Carter et al., 2021).¹ We spend twice as much on police, prisons and courts than on income supplements, food stamps and welfare (Ingraham, 2020; Lowrey, 2020). We have turned to incarceration as an ill-fated solution to social problems.

We have an incarceration problem, pouring money into a consistently failing system. As one report from Florida State University’s Institute for Justice and Research and Development says, “What other social intervention has a cost of over \$50 billion annually [although other experts put the cost at \$80 billion annually], a failure rate of 60% to 75%, and has been tolerated for nearly four decades?” (Pettus-Davis & Epperson, 2015, p. 18) It’s time for a change.

To reverse the trajectory that turned the U.S. into the world’s jailer, we lay out a restorative pathway to decarceration and abolition with specific reference to Maine, where we live. We believe this pathway offers a far greater chance of success in addressing social problems and ensuring community safety than hyperincarceration ever could. Our vision is a long-term one that we will not likely see in our lifetimes but includes many building blocks we can fight for now, providing an encouraging foundation for future generations to continue the work.


Maine Context

In Maine, about 7,000 people are under Correctional supervision, with about 1,700 people in Maine prisons, an additional 5400 people under some form of DOC supervision in their community, and another 2,000 in Maine jails at any one time (*Incarceration Trends in Maine*, 2019; MDOC Data Team, 2022). An estimated 40,000 people, held pretrial, cycle through Maine jails every single year (MDOC Data Team, 2022).


Maine’s incarceration rates are racially unbalanced. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) comprise 6% of the entire Maine population, but 20% of those incarcerated in Maine. Black people are 2% of the Maine population, but comprise 11% of the incarcerated population and 12% of those serving life/virtual life sentences in Maine (MDOC Data Team, 2022).

With over 7,000 people currently ensnared in Maine’s carceral system, we have an opportunity to winnow the prison system out of existence. When we look at California’s mass release of 3,500 people in 2020, the 45% reduction in the prison population in Massachusetts over the past 10 years, or the recent move by Kate Brown, the Governor of Oregon, to give clemency to 1,147 people (Waldroupe, 2022), we see a reason for hope in Maine. As a result of these efforts, there was no spike in crime. No spike in violence. With less than 2,000 people incarcerated in ALL of Maine’s prisons, abolition is possible through safe, intentional, structured decarceration.

In what follows, we lay out our three-part restorative pathway to decarceration and abolition. ‘Before’ offers a plan for the things we should be doing to keep people out of prisons and jails in the first place through harm



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reduction and meeting everyone’s basic needs. ‘Middle’ details what needs to happen inside prisons and jails to transform them from places of harm and hopelessness to places of repair and healing. ‘After’ offers a roadmap to a restorative pathway to re-entry after a period of incarceration.

I. BEFORE: Building safe, healthy communities while keeping people out of prison and jails

There is no shortage of evidence about what works to interrupt harm, build safe communities, and minimize the number of people sentenced to jail or prison time. Sending people to jail or prison seldom accomplishes the goal of making communities safer; in fact, evidence suggests that spending time in jail or prison is traumatic, criminogenic, and ineffective at impeding recidivism. In short, there is no evidence that incarceration reduces illegal behavior, and rather, it might augment it. While we will always need ways to separate those who are causing serious harm, using jails and prisons to address a wide range of social problems is not only ineffective, it hurts communities and families. It drains resources

from communities, and the financial, emotional, and social costs are enormous. Developing alternative responses to harm and investing in the services and resources that build safe communities are essential pathways toward a better future.

Invest in Youth

Children need to feel safe in their communities, heard and nurtured in their schools, loved in their families, and healthy in their bodies. Right now, in Maine, we are failing at every single one of these measures. One in five Maine kids is food insecure (Maine Equal Justice, 2021). One in twelve lacks health insurance. One-fifth of Maine youth are involved in the justice, welfare or behavior systems, are homeless, or are disconnected from school (Layton et al., 2021). Around fifteen percent of Maine youth fail to graduate from high school (*High School Graduation Rates by County*, 2023) and fourteen percent live in poverty (*2023 Maine Kids Count Data Book*, 2023). We can—and must—do better.

To break the school-to-prison pipeline that condemns so many children to a life cycle of imprisonment, we need to do the following:

- **Implement Restorative Justice practices** in all schools to replace disciplinary systems that rely on punishment, suspension, expulsion,

¹ For additional information, see complaint to the United Nations Special Rapporteurs which includes multiple signatories and statements from individuals sentenced to LWOP and their loved ones, available at https://www.deathbyincarcerationistorture.com/_files/ugd/22acfc_8b4c9394670c44099f562da0481cd2d1.pdf

and policing. Maine spends about \$12,500 to educate one student (*Resident Student Per Pupil Operating Costs*, n.d.) but \$530,181 to incarcerate one young person under the age of 18 for a year (*Bring Back Parole! A Guide to LD 178*, n.d.). It is far better to invest in restorative justice and therapeutic approaches for kids than to incarcerate them.

- **Reform school curricula.** As much as forty percent of the people in Maine prisons failed to graduate from high school. We should ensure every child has access to curricula that reflect their experience in American society, feed their curiosity and emotional growth, teach financial literacy, and grapple in meaningful, effective and hopeful ways with injustices in our national history.

- **Provide free or affordable higher education** to everyone who wants access. Maine Community Colleges cost under \$15,000 a year; imprisoning someone costs up to \$78,000 a year. Private colleges and universities should extend targeted scholarships to those who are justice-impacted.²

- **Fund community centers** that provide credible mentors; free health, dental and counseling care; gardening programs; nutritious food; nutrition education; and enriching before- and after-school programs. Youth need to feel that their communities care about them and are willing to invest in places that are dedicated to their health and well-being.

- **Provide extra supports for kids with incarcerated parents.** During January 2015-May 2020, there were 3,403 children in Maine with a parent in prison (Foley et al., 2020), a statistic that does not include parents in jails or on probation. Having an incarcerated parent is a traumatic. Adverse Childhood Experience³ related to heightened levels of homelessness,

mental health problems, behavioral challenges, low educational attainment, and involvement with the justice system. Children with incarcerated parents are six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves (Martin, 2017).

- **Eradicate juvenile incarceration** and replace it with community-based supportive housing and a statewide restorative justice diversion program for youth that is run by Restorative Justice professionals and not by law enforcement or Department of Corrections.⁴ Diversion for juveniles should be the norm because evidence shows that diversion rather than incarceration reduces the likelihood of another arrest, incarceration, and violent acts, and increases the rate of school completion and earned income in adulthood.

- **Extend the presumption of diversion over incarceration** to those aged 18-27 years old, following the lead of efforts in states like California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Utah. Until 1976, the *maximum* sentence for those up to 28 years old convicted of any crime in Maine was three years, a law that changed with the punitive turn of criminal justice reform in 1976. In the face of such overwhelming evidence that shows harsh punishments do nothing to deter crime, how are we more punitive in our legal system now than we were almost 50 years ago?

Invest in Families and Communities

Maine families are struggling with high living, housing, and heating costs, skyrocketing levels of anxiety and depression from the pandemic (DeAngelis, 2021), rising inequality, lack of decent and affordable childcare options, low wages, and an out of control healthcare system

that is so awful that healthcare costs are the number one cause of bankruptcy in the U.S. Under all of these pressures, people are suffering from the sheer effort of trying to be healthy and well. A recent public opinion poll shows that 74% of the 3,876 voters surveyed define “safe communities” as those that invest in good jobs, schools, housing, healthcare, and infrastructure rather than in more police, jails, prisons, and harsh sentences (*Findings from Messaging Research on Crime and Public Safety*, n.d.). Most crimes are crimes of need and perceived need, so a top social priority must be ensuring that everyone’s basic human needs are met by shifting funds from corrections and policing to social supports like secure housing, healthy food, healthcare, mental health care, childcare, public transportation, internet access, and basic utilities. If it costs \$78,000 to incarcerate one person for one year in Maine, imagine if that money went to supporting an entire family instead?

- **Invest in jobs.** Mandate a living wage for all. Maine’s minimum wage is \$12.75/hour, while a living wage for a single adult with no children is estimated at \$16.53/hour (*Living Wage Calculation for Maine*, n.d.).

- **Invest in housing.** 25,000 people are currently waitlisted in Maine for Section 8 housing vouchers. According to a recent report, it costs more than twice as much to incarcerate someone in state prison than it would cost to provide them with “housing, weekly counseling, and medication-assisted treatment for a year at current MaineCare reimbursement rates” (*A Better Path for Maine*, 2022).

- **Invest in healthcare.** Universal health coverage.

- **Build a mental health response network.** The U.S. has one of the world’s highest rates of suicide, depression and anxiety, but the one of the lowest rates of mental health practitioners per capita among other industrialized countries (Snyder, 2022). Canada, Switzerland, and

Australia have *twice* as many mental health professionals per 100,000 people as the U.S. To correct this deficit, we need to redirect funding from police to care workers, mental health responders, and drug counseling and treatment professionals.

- **Expand free access to substance use disorder treatment programs.** According to a 2022 report, “Between 2014 and 2019, inflation-adjusted spending on substance use treatment through the MaineCare system increased 2 percent. However, over the same period, state and local spending on corrections increased 13 percent, while spending on police enforcement increased 14 percent” (*A Better Path for Maine*, 2022). And according to the Maine Recovery Advocacy Project, Maine currently has a mere two detox centers with a total of only 20 beds available to people who are uninsured (Lundy, 2022). The vast majority of incarcerated mothers in Maine are sentenced for drug infractions. Due to the length of their sentences, many lose custody of their children while incarcerated, causing devastating and unnecessary trauma to both parent and child. Making drug treatment rather than incarceration available to everyone will keep families together and is more effective for treating substance use disorder than prison.

- **Transform foster care.** When children are neglected or abused, the behaviors tend to be driven by mental health issues and/or unaddressed trauma in the life of the person causing them harm. There are some situations where children are legitimately at risk and must be removed for their own safety. Maine needs to explore and adopt a mandated supporting model⁵ (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021) that keeps children with their families while providing meaningful support, services, and resources to the struggling caregivers, whether parent(s) or guardian(s). A risk/needs assessment that takes into account the racial bias that underpins a quicker removal of

² Maine currently offers free tuition to community college to people who graduated from high school in 2020, 2021, and 2022. This should be the norm.

³ Adverse childhood experiences are traumatic events or environmental factors during childhood that threaten the child’s sense of safety, stability, and bonding.

⁴ For ideas and additional information, see “Community Driven Approaches” at [nokidsinprison.org](https://www.nokidsinprison.org), available <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/solutions/community-driven-approaches> and “Youth-LED Justice: Leadership, Education, and Diversion,” at youthledjustice.org

⁵ For a primer on mandated supporting models, see <https://jmacforfamilies.org/mandated-supporting>

children from BIPOC and impoverished families should also be developed (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). In cases where a lack of resources is due to a lack of access to meaningful education, training, and employment, there needs to be support provided to meet these basic needs, rather than a punishment and mandate to attain that which is out of the caregiver's grasp.

Decriminalize People and Demilitarize Systems

As of 2017, the number of Mainers in jail increased 649% since 1970 and those in prison increased 151% since 1983 (*Incarceration Trends in Maine*, 2019). Much of this rise in incarceration is due to the vast implementation of new drug laws and the proliferation of actions and behaviors being criminalized through statutory law. Contrary to the hyperviolence rhetoric, the vast majority of 911 calls to the police are for situations unrelated to crime, harm, or violence and thus should be handled by professionals with expertise in mental health crises, substance use disorder, and social work.

• **Decriminalize drugs.** From 1980-2015, the number of women in Maine jails increased 1,981% and in Maine prisons 794%. The dramatic rise is primarily due to drug laws; Maine Department of Corrections reports that 72% of women in Maine prisons are convicted of drug-related charges. Class A drug arrests doubled during 2008-18, and in 2021 almost 40% of all people entering prison were convicted of drug furnishing, possession, or illegal importing. According to a 2022 report, Maine spends \$111 million every single year to arrest, detain, and sentence people who use drugs (*A Better Path for Maine*, 2022). The report states, "Maine's law enforcement spends \$8,427 alone for each drug-related arrest. This amount could cover seven months of rent in Cumberland County, two-thirds of the cost of educating a public school student for a whole year, or four months of intensive outpatient treatment

for someone on MaineCare." Instead of incarcerating people who use drugs, Maine needs to make drug counseling and medication-assisted treatment widely available and easily accessible.

• **Decriminalize sex work and homelessness.**

In both cases, the people being punished are often victims of crime and harm. Rather than criminalizing survival behaviors, Maine needs to provide support and protections against sexual and financial exploitation—without using this as a way to expand reasons to incarcerate people.

• **Prioritize alternatives to incarceration.**

Nationwide, only 10-15% of cases go to trial and the rest are decided through a plea deal. We need to change the presumption that this must involve incarceration and prioritize alternatives, sending people to prison only as a last resort when absolutely necessary for public safety.

• **Demilitarize the police and transform**

police culture from the inside out. Across the U.S., \$7 billion of decommissioned military equipment has been transferred to local police departments.

• **Fund and construct non-police crisis response systems**

for people facing mental health challenges so the police do not have to become involved (Kim et al., 2021).

• **Revise the Maine Criminal Code** to remove 'truth in sentencing' and sentencing enhancements that keep people locked up for far too long. The American Bar Association states that sentences of over ten years do not deter crime and do more harm than good. Almost a quarter of the prison population in Maine is serving sentences of longer than ten years.

• **Build an effective public defender system.**

Maine is the only state in the U.S. without one, primarily relying on unregulated and unsupervised court-appointed attorneys to represent poor and indigent people accused of crimes.

• **Eliminate cash bail.** A 2019 Maine Law Review article calls Maine's bail system "antiquated, problematic, and arguably unconstitutional" (Walton, 2019, p. 177). Cash bail has

already been eliminated for the most minor crimes, like littering, but an estimated 80-100% of the people in Maine jails are pre-trial.

• **Reform probation policies** to ensure minor violations do not result in reincarceration. In recent years, over 45% of prison admissions were for probation revocations.

Build Community-based safety and responses to harm

Much of the language about abolition and transformative justice looks to 'the community' to address harms. Thus, we have to rebuild our sense of community, reverse the onslaught of new laws that put people in jail and prison, and develop community practices to support people who have been harmed and hold those who have caused harm accountable. And we need to do these things in a way that is restorative, not punitive. A recent report from the Alliance for Justice and Safety, *Crime Survivors Speak*, shows that those who have experienced violent harm are not healed when the person who hurt them is sent to prison (*Crime Survivors Speak: The First-Ever National Survey of Victims' Views on Safety and Justice*, n.d.).

Instead, they want a justice system that: 1. centers their need for healing, 2. effectively addresses what caused the harm in the first place, and 3. relies on community-based interventions rather than incarceration to ensure that the person who caused the harm does not harm them again or cause harm to others.

• **Research what drives contact with the criminal legal system and incarceration.**

Communities need full access to how law enforcement, courts, sentencing, and corrections institutions are working. DAs should build data dashboards to report on arrests and decisions about diversion, prosecution, and sentencing.

• **Create individual and community/neighborhood safety plans.** Each of us has the ability to create a safety plan⁶ on how to respond to interpersonal harm without involving the police. And, while situations of domestic and sexual violence are more sensitive and complex, models exist for survivors and supporters to promote safety while taking account of power disparities and marginalization.⁷



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⁶ For more information see "10 Action Ideas for Building a Police-Free Future" at <https://www.mpd150.com/10-action-ideas-for-building-a-police-free-future/>

⁷ See Community Justice Exchange "Safety Planning and Intimate Partner Violence: A Toolkit for Survivors and Supporters" available at https://survivedandpunished.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SafetyToolkit_5.2.22.pdf

• **Develop an effective response to domestic violence and sexual abuse.** Most people experiencing intimate partner violence do not call the police for fear of retaliation, abuse from the police and criminal legal system, fear, shame, and economic/housing insecurity if their abuser goes to jail. The carceral responses to domestic violence promoted since the 1970s are not working (Carpenter, 2020); we are not incarcerating our way out of appalling levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse. We need to develop new approaches that involve much more robust ways to keep those being harmed safe through housing and economic supports and trauma-informed interventions, while also finding new ways to interrupt the behavior of those causing harm through effective transformative justice and accountability interventions.⁸

• **Build capacity of community-based restorative justice organizations** to support community building circles and restorative justice conferencing. Restorative Justice Conferencing is a three-phase model that guides harmed people and the people who harmed them through a process of meaningful accountability and repair (Whelan & Weil, 2015).

• **Create restorative options for addressing harm** that are not restricted to victim-offender conferencing, such as those outlined by the leading prosecutor and founder of Fair and Just Prosecution and those pioneered by Common Justice in New York and the Alliance for Safety and Justice.⁹

• **Elect and support DAs who are committed** to restorative justice and diversion pathways to harm reduction.

• **Enact safe and sane gun laws.** A primary characteristic that distinguishes the crime rates in the U.S. from those in other countries is easy access to guns. To start: raise the minimum age

and ban assault rifles without criminalizing and incarcerating those in possession of the weapons. Confiscate and dispose of the weapons without disposing of the people who have them.

Confront growing wealth inequality

Inequality in the U.S. is growing. This is important because higher inequality within a society is positively correlated with higher rates of violent crime. Today, 10% percent of American households hold 76% of all wealth (Sumar, 2022). As of late 2021, the top 1% of Americans held more wealth (\$45.9 trillion) than the middle 60% of the population (\$35.7 trillion). The 788 billionaires in the U.S. collectively own \$3.431 trillion. CEOs now bring in salaries that are wildly disproportionate to employees. And real estate is becoming increasingly concentrated under corporate control: in 2021, 50 very large corporate buyers held billions of dollars in apartments and single-family-rental home portfolios (Szymoniak, 2022). We need to confront growing wealth inequality to create a more just society.

• **Revise the tax code.** The contemporary wealth gap is unprecedented and largely due to inherited wealth and low tax rates on business assets, corporate assets and capital gains, all of which are policies that favor the already wealthy.

• **Reduce corporate control of real estate,** impose rent control, and invest in housing for poor and middle-income families.

• **Support alternative forms of ownership** by supporting community-based land trusts, cooperatively owned agricultural and residential sites, and alternative economic networks (time banks, cooperative finance, etc.).

• **Rethink public financing.** Transform the

systems and entities we run a deficit to pay for. Every year Congress allocates *more* money than requested by the military, while refusing to fund education, housing, healthcare, childcare and other reparative public goods at necessary and life-sustaining levels (Appel, 2020).

I. MIDDLE: Transforming prisons and jails into spaces of healing and rehabilitation, rather than punishment and harm

Prisons don't work. They don't make communities safer, they don't solve social problems, they don't effectively address mental health challenges, poverty, or substance use disorder, and they don't stop violence. Instead, they compound these problems.

Change takes time, energy, effort, collaboration...and more time. There are some steps that can be taken within prisons and jails to turn them into spaces of healing and rehabilitation rather than punishment and harm, and that can lead toward eventual decarceration. of currently incarcerated people will eventually return home. Jails and prisons need to be set up to help people be best prepared for that day.

Build a restorative culture inside

Prison culture is one of suspicion, distrust, and constant surveillance. Everyone who steps foot into this system is immediately warned that manipulation, exploitation, and unprovoked violence are ever present. The U.S. prison system is based on a deeply entrenched culture of separation, dehumanization, and othering. Thankfully, here in Maine, the shift toward uplifting the inherent dignity and worth of each human being in the system (staff, residents, and administrators) has begun. Yet, as with

any such effort, this culture change work is at various stages on the inside, reflecting a visceral struggle between what has been and the hope that exists for what can be.

Prisons are traumatizing to those who live there and those who work there. Most residents arrive at the prison already deeply traumatized. Many staff members come to work at the prison following stints in the military or law enforcement that leave traumatic memories. Incarcerated people and staff alike need to have opportunities to engage in meaningful trauma healing work to support holistic success after prison. Prison culture needs to shift enough to support this type of vulnerable inner work, as there is still a deep concern that sensitive information people reveal about themselves in programs will be used to harm them outside of those spaces. The shift toward a restorative culture on the inside needs to be supported and adopted by residents, staff, and administrators in these ways.

• **Expand trauma healing programs for residents and staff.** With the growing acknowledgment that men as well as women suffer from trauma and the exacerbated impact of living in a culture that conditions men to suppress any non-masculine emotion, there needs to be an expansion of trauma-informed, healing-centered programming.

• **Implement restorative justice** for staff, residents, and administrators to dismantle the debilitating "us vs. them" mentality and rehumanize everyone within the system. Circle practice is a framework for building community in a way that brings people together with the intentionality of suspending positional power. Leo Hylton has developed a framework that can be adjusted and implemented in nearly any hierarchical institution.¹⁰

• **Establish generative dialogue circles.** Residents and staff can create spaces of

⁸ See "Ending Mass Incarceration, Centralizing Racial Justice, and Developing Alternatives: The Role of Anti-Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Programs" webinar archive housed at the National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women (NCDBW) available at <https://www.ncdbw.org/webinars-end-mass-incar-series-list>

⁹ For more information, see Common Justice at commonjustice.org and Alliance for Safety and Justice at <https://asj.allianceforsafetyandjustice.org/>

¹⁰ See open access document, "Restorative Community-Building Circles" at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-VckeZ3bkwiJSEZwe-GUxslGjnD5dP9rm0mxslC93tuc/edit>

generative dialogue¹¹ through which to build an action-oriented group to implement restorative dialogue and practices throughout the prison or jail.

- **Build a team of Restorative Justice (RJ) practitioners to address harm.** Train staff and residents in restorative justice practices and processes,¹² ultimately building a robust team of RJ practitioners to hold community building circles and support RJ conferencing processes on the inside.¹³ Once up and running, the RJ team could take the place of the disciplinary board, make decisions about responses to harm, and support accountability and repair in the aftermath of interpersonal harm and conflict.
- **Shift policy away from discipline and punishment toward accountability and repair.** Remove any disciplinary write-up that is not related to interpersonal harm. For various classes of infractions that do cause harm, respond with restorative pathways toward meaningful accountability.
- **Support creative staff-resident collaborations.** Overcoming the “us vs. them” mentality is integral to shifting prison culture to a more restorative one.
- **Initiate staff-resident-administration events with food.** If a restorative culture based on mutual respect is to be built, it must have a foundation of interconnectedness and mutual understanding. Jails and prisons need to initiate interactive staff-resident-administration events that involve breaking bread together, such as through sports tournaments, craft fairs, co-learning classes, collaborative creative projects, mini-conferences, or other multi-hour events where there is a break for lunch or a substantial snack.
- **Expand the principle of normality throughout facilities.** The principle of normality as stated in the Norway system is that “No one shall serve their sentence under stricter

- circumstances than necessary for the security in the community, and offenders shall be placed in the lowest possible security regime. During the serving of a sentence, life inside should resemble life outside as much as possible.” (Bottolfs, n.d., p. 75) This model should extend throughout every carceral unit to the extent possible without legitimately compromising security and safety. Even where higher security is warranted, decency, compassion, and respect need to be the norm for all interpersonal engagement. When it comes to behavioral interactions and expectations, decisions about rules should be based on these questions: is this normal in outside communities, and is this harmful? If the behavior is normal and not harmful there should be no punitive consequences.
- **Allow residents to personalize their living quarters.** When incarcerated people are allowed to personalize their living area, through paint, decorative options, posting pictures, drawings, and calendars, they are more likely to take care of their space.
 - **Demilitarize staff uniforms.** The majority of incarcerated people have endured trauma in their lives related to police (Lee & Callahan, 2022). Militaristic uniforms are triggering. Carceral institutions should get rid of paramilitary ensembles.
 - **Base Corrections Officer training in supportive rather than militaristic techniques.** This shift should be adopted throughout all carceral facilities, ensuring that contact officers—security officers whose purpose is dynamic security—are trained in creating safety through establishing rapport, connection, and trust.
 - **Encourage the universal use of first names.** Stripping someone of their first name is one of the innumerable ways the prison system dehumanizes people. Using first names

can afford staff, residents, and administrators the opportunity to reaffirm their humanity and personhood in a way that is otherwise denied them.

Normalize professional development

- Our taxes pay for lives to be wasted inside. People who come to prison are expected to watch tv, play video games or cards, work menial jobs, read as many fantasy books as possible—anything to waste time. The carceral system is designed to cultivate prisoner’s lethargy: a total lack of energy, willpower, and the motivation for personal growth. Opportunities need to be expanded to include professional training, pathways to certification and licensure, and opportunities for professional networking and development in preparation for release. Everything in this section that we are calling for in relation to incarcerated people holds true for staff members as well.
- **Initiate or expand formalized peer mentorship training.** Maine State Prison currently runs a certified intentional peer support training for residents.¹⁴ Staff should be offered this training and compensated for completing the mentorship training, which could facilitate a shift toward the “contact officer” model from Norway that has proven transformative for Correctional security (Norwegian Correctional Service, n.d.).
 - **Shift policy to allow for peer crisis intervention.** Most incarcerated people have experienced trauma prior to their incarceration, and becoming incarcerated is itself inherently traumatic. Self-injurious behavior, including suicide attempts, is prevalent in carceral systems (Pope & Delany-Brumsey, 2016). Rather than relying on force or the power of carceral authority, incarcerated people should be trained to deescalate situations that have not

yet turned violent.

- **Initiate or expand professional training opportunities.** A determined prisoner can work their way through *all* of the programming available within the first two years of their incarceration, at which point opportunities to gain professional certification must be made available.
- **Allow incarcerated people to become Vocational Training Instructors (VTIs).** When incarcerated people are trained to become trainers, paid free world wages, they attain a level of professionalism that will prepare them for their own release, which will significantly reduce the chances of recidivism.
- **Expand available vocational programs across all facilities.** The demand for tradespeople is currently at an all-time high (Irwin, 2021), and incarcerated people can be trained in high-demand occupations. The National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) offers over 80 programs from basic trades work to project management in multiple levels of experience. Other programs, such as Habitat for Humanity, can support community service efforts like housing for veterans and low-income portable homes, homes for people transitioning out of prison, and more. Other vocational programs could be implemented such as welding, barbering, hairdressing, carpentry, auto mechanics and autobody, cabinet making, and furniture making.
- **Train staff and residents in restorative justice.** A Restorative Justice course¹⁵ can provide a firm foundation for the implementation of circle practice, the adoption of a restorative mindset, and a reframing of accountability in a way that highlights the difference between punishment and accountability, showing how people can be held accountable for the harm they cause in a way that facilitates healing

¹¹ For more information, see “What is Dialogue?” at <https://www.whatisdialogue.com/about/>

¹² See Maine Calling radio program, “How Restorative Justice Works, and How it is Being Implemented in Maine” at <https://www.maine-public.org/show/maine-calling/2022-05-23/how-restorative-justice-works-and-how-it-is-being-implemented-in-maine>

¹³ For more information on RJ Conferencing, see <https://ossa.msu.edu/restorative-justice/restorative-conferencing>

¹⁴ Further details can be found at <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/obh/training-certification/intentional-peer-support>

¹⁵ For an example, see “Restorative and Transformative Justice: Peer Led Course and Practicum” curriculum available as an open source document at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/17bbP3jPcqm8dL4Q37h8gQ0YTOF4drt1/edit>

instead of causing more harm. This peer-led curriculum should be implemented widely in jails and prisons as an officially recognized certification course for staff, residents, and administrators alike.

• **Open opportunities for residents to work for outside organizations.** Facilities with internet capability should have a framework¹⁶ for residents to be able to work remotely for any organization willing to hire them and pay free world wages, with only court-mandated fines, fees, restitution, and victim compensation withheld. These opportunities can build agency and accountability into the current system so people can pay taxes and care for their families, while also making a meaningful dent in their financial obligations (currently not possible with menial wages available to residents inside).

• **Normalize outside bank accounts.** A bank account is a basic necessity in today's world. It should be common practice for caseworkers to help incarcerated people open an outside savings account using their warden's ID from their facility.

• **Expand access to higher education inside.** All incarcerated people should have access to higher education since one of the strongest factors in reducing recidivism is increasing education level. In Maine, less than 1% of those residents who attended college while incarcerated recidivated after their release (Miller, n.d.).

Enhance community and family connections

One of our most basic human needs is human connection. When people go to prison or jail, they leave a hole in their family and community. When people return home from incarceration, they need to know they are returning to

connection. Parenting from prison is an incredibly difficult and painful experience.¹⁷ Imagine trying to hear about a child's day at school; support their caregiver in whatever instruction, guidance, or correction they offered that day; and read a bedtime story to your child...all in 15 or 30 minutes.

• **Build inside-out connections.** There are numerous ways to build connections between people on the inside and people on the outside: integrated college courses; inside-out reading and discussion groups; humanities projects; mentoring (both ways); professional development courses; public speaking engagements and community discussions. Building these connections enables a level of social capital that will support increased community safety and connection, not just for those returning home, but also for those who are welcoming them.

• **Change the narrative about incarcerated people.** Those who have created the greatest interpersonal harms are often the most committed and passionate about creating healing in the same place that they caused harm. Stories of individuals who are striving to be better, to do better, to serve more are the stories that need to be told. Podcasters, columnists, journalists, family members, activists, advocates, community members of all kinds—we all have a role to play in shifting the societal narrative around who incarcerated people are.

• **Expand victim-offender dialogue (VOD).**¹⁸ When people cause harm, it should be their responsibility to work to repair the harm they caused. The current system does not allow for that. VOD is currently the only restorative justice option available in the Maine adult criminal legal system after a person has been

sentenced, and it can only be initiated by the victim. This avenue of healing must be expanded so that victims are no longer placed in a position of unnecessary risk and vulnerability toward revictimization. What if the person who harmed them is not ready to take accountability for what they did? More harm is caused. Instead, VOD should be expanded so an incarcerated person is able to reach out to the Victim Services Department to take responsibility for what they did and request the initiation of a victim offender dialogue process.

• **Create surrogate avenues for victim-offender dialogue (VOD).** Victim offender dialogue is not always safe or appropriate between the actual parties of an interpersonal harm. We need to create avenues and capacity for surrogate victims and offenders. This would require a coordinated effort to create an infrastructure or database of people who have been the victims and offenders of specific crimes. People who are ready to take accountability for the harms they caused can stand in and answer the questions of people who have been harmed in similar ways to facilitate partial repair. Surrogate victims who have been harmed can participate in similar ways for those who have harmed others to share how they have been affected by the crime committed against them.

• **Fully revamp visitation.** When a person is sentenced to jail or prison, there's no consideration given to the impact on their family. Visitation needs to reflect this burden. Visitors should be allowed to bring food, to sit down and eat and enjoy being with their incarcerated loved one. Children should feel free to play with other children during visitation. To reflect the considerable distance that many people need to travel, visitation should be multiple hours.

• **Make conjugal visits available.** Incarceration wreaks havoc on families and romantic relationships. Within the confines of jails and prisons, there is absolutely no expectation

of privacy. The idea of engaging in an intimate conversation with the person you love evokes fear when a total stranger is within earshot at all times. How can a loving relationship thrive without intimacy? How can a child feel comfortable talking to their parent(s) about being bullied in school or about their first time falling in love? Conjugal visits are necessary. People in intimate relationships should have the ability to engage one another in private without the prying ears and eyes of security and total strangers. There should be visit spaces that support privacy, intimacy, and romance if loving relationships, marriages, and intact families will have any chance of surviving incarceration.

• **Set up educational parenting visits.** Parents don't stop being parents when they become incarcerated. Each facility should schedule separate, education-oriented visits where incarcerated parents can use this time to read to their kids and help them with homework. With the expansion of technology, it is also now possible to facilitate parent-teacher conferences and child visits when travel is prohibitive.

• **Implement a restorative conference-type process with family members.** Everyone is harmed when a person is incarcerated, which requires healing. Victim-offender dialogue can also be implemented as a restorative conference process between an incarcerated person and their family members. An evidence-based process is used in both Maryland and Massachusetts for re-entry purposes.¹⁹ Engaging in re-entry mediation has shown to reduce recidivism by 6% for each meeting (*Evaluation Results – CMM Re-Entry Mediation*, n.d.). If an incarcerated person engages in all three mediation opportunities, their chances of recidivating are lowered by roughly 18%.


• **Make phone calls and video visits free.** With all of the financial expenses that burden families of incarcerated loved ones, the ability to receive assurance of their well-being, give and receive guidance and support, and remain

¹⁶ See open-source guide, "Outline for Remote Work from MDOC facilities" at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D5-eNxcW9_CQqwE/edit

¹⁷ For a conversation on the difficulties of parenting in prison, see Freedom & Captivity's audio program "We're Creating the Next Generation of Broken People: Parenting and Prison" at <https://www.freedomandcaptivity.org/7-were-creating-the-next-generation-of-broken-people-parenting-and-prison/>

¹⁸ To view the Maine Department of Correction's Policy entitled "Victim/Prisoner or Victim/Resident Dialogue," see <https://www.maine.gov/future/sites/maine.gov.corrections/files/inline-files/6.8%20VICTIM%20PRISONER%20OR%20VICTIM%20RESIDENT%20DIALOGUE.pdf>

¹⁹ For examples, see Community Mediation Maryland's Programs and Initiatives at <https://mdmediation.org/programs-initiatives/>



Older residents can see an opportunity to provide the guidance that they did not receive in their youth and yearn for an opportunity to provide mentorship in a healing, guiding, and loving fashion. Opportunities to provide this type of mentorship before these young people become legal adults should be allowed, shifting policy as necessary to support it.

connected over time and distance should not be one of them. The lack of regulation around the pricing of video visits has allowed for the duopoly of Global Tel Link and Securus to charge exorbitant fees for video visits (i.e., a 20-minute video call costs \$5.95; Ross, 2021). A recent federal breakthrough can provide meaningful protection against this.²⁰

- **Grant all residents access to email.** We live in the age of technology. Denying incarcerated residents the opportunity to communicate through the medium so widely used by their loved ones only enforces an unnecessary level of separation. So many people have been incarcerated throughout the rapid technological expansion that the value of email access extends beyond the interpersonal and into the professional, rehabilitative, and developmental.
- **Open mentoring opportunities between adult and juvenile facilities.** A deeply painful experience for older incarcerated people is seeing young people enter the carceral system and recognizing the hurt, pain, unhealed

trauma, and lack of support so many young people in the system are experiencing. Older residents can see an opportunity to provide the guidance that they did not receive in their youth and yearn for an opportunity to provide mentorship in a healing, guiding, and loving fashion. Opportunities to provide this type of mentorship *before* these young people become legal adults should be allowed, shifting policy as necessary to support it.

- **Support full civic engagement.** Maine is one of two states that allow incarcerated people to vote (Uggen et al., 2022). In a country that touts its status as being a democratic nation, incarcerated people should be supported in fully engaging in democratic processes and duties, including testifying at legislative hearings and local community meetings. Such civic engagement reduces their chances of committing new crimes upon release (Bazemore & Stinchcomb, 2004).
- **Open public institutions to the public.** Corrections facilities need a generous policy

of allowing outside people inside, such as for talent shows; educational, programmatic, and professional conferences; speakers and performers; outside participation in inside civic group meetings, and more.

- **Expand and normalize greater family connection.** Family connections would be significantly strengthened through regular furloughs, expanded visitation, and parenting support. Under Maine Statue, the Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner has the freedom to furlough incarcerated residents who have served half of their sentence (Title 34-A, § 3035. Rehabilitative Programs and Correctional Facilities under the Commissioner's Control, n.d.). People who are deeply connected to their families and their communities are extremely unlikely to cause harm to those families and communities. ring back regular furloughs.

- **Allow incarcerated people to teach and facilitate across the walls.** With the growing number of college-educated incarcerated people, opportunities should be created to allow them to teach and facilitate classes, programs, and community discussion groups with outside participants about relevant topics such as restorative justice, transformative justice, trauma, trauma healing, transitional justice, personal development, existential struggles, emotional literacy, and creative expression. With MDOC support, we successfully co-taught a college course last year,²¹ collaborated on the Freedom and Captivity Curriculum Project currently underway,²² and contributed to the Transitional Justice Course²³ that Leo Hylton coordinated last Fall.

Support healthy living.

Chronic illness is a byproduct of incarceration. Among other common maladies, arthritis,

asthma, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis C, high blood pressure, and strokes are prevalent (*Data and Statistics about Correctional Health*, 2023). In addition to physical health issues, mental health illnesses are prolific in carceral spaces, whether they are diagnosed or not. Some of the top contenders include anxiety, depression, hypertension, substance use disorder, and bipolar disorder. As of December 2022, 985 out of 1654 incarcerated residents in Maine were prescribed psych meds (MDOC Data Team, 2023). While not as commonly discussed, financial unhealth can be just as devastating as physical and mental health problems in an incarcerated person's life and re-entry efforts. So long as jails and prisons exist, they should serve as places of healing, restoration, and transformation.

- **Strengthen and open medical and mental health services inside.** Receiving proper medical or mental health care in carceral spaces has been an ongoing issue. Jails and prisons tend to be built in remote areas, making it extremely difficult to recruit qualified medical professionals. This leads to chronic understaffing, which causes unnecessary suffering and lack of proper medical or mental health care. Medical and mental health care services on the inside need to be more transparent and more responsive. If medical providers are unable to provide sufficient care, carceral institutions should have the freedom to receive services from other vendors.

- **Restructure treatment of substance use disorder (SUD).** While controversial,²⁴ medication assisted treatment (MAT) has proven to be effective in lowering overdose-related deaths in jails, prisons, and the general public (*Over-Jailed and Un-Treated*, 2021). The Maine Department of Corrections has been lauded for its adoption and rollout of

²⁰ See recent legislation signed by President Joe Biden: <https://www.maine.gov/newsroom/news/2023-01-01/biden-signs-a-bill-to-fight-expensive-prison-phone-call-costs>
²¹ See "Meet Leo, the College's first incarcerated professor," at the Colby Echo found at <https://colbyecho.news/2023/03/17/meet-leo-the-colleges-first-incarcerated-professor/>
²² More information can be found at: <https://www.freedomandcaptivity.org/category/action/#Freedom%20%20Captivity%20Curriculum%20Project>
²³ More information can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WFZ4gW-6UYgekID6gB6LX1P8qQWLoHNv/view>
²⁴ For an overview of the argument, see <https://uprisehealth.com/resources/medication-assisted-treatment-a-solution-or-substitution/>

MAT throughout its facilities. This has led to a reduction in overdoses inside MDOC facilities and post release. And yet concerns remain that MAT on its own fails to treat the underlying issues that led to substance use disorder in the first place; therapeutic treatment is also essential.

- **Introduce more healthful food.** From the time he was Warden at Maine State Prison, Commissioner Liberty has rightfully been praised for his efforts at introducing more healthful foods throughout MDOC facilities (“Bringing the Movement for Food Justice inside Prisons and Jails,” n.d.). The introduction of the Master Gardener program²⁵ and now the Master Food Preserver course²⁶ has expanded the amount and variety of produce cultivated on MDOC properties. This move away from starches and sugars that contribute to the chronic illnesses so pervasive among residents is necessary if returning community members are going to return home healthy, rather than bringing their health burdens on their families.
- **Install actual stoves so residents can learn how to cook.** One of the hallmarks of Maine State Prison’s Earned Living Unit is the stove upon which residents are able to cook the food that they grow (Hirschhorn, 2022). Far too many people don’t know how to cook. By installing actual stoves and providing more opportunities for incarcerated residents to learn how to cook, people become better prepared for their eventual return to their communities.

Move toward decarceration

As we have emphasized, the Maine Department of Corrections is doing a lot of things right. They are prioritizing educational opportunities, reforming internal culture, opening opportunities for professional development and community connections for residents, and evaluating

models for normalization. These are critically important reforms for ensuring that prisons are places that help people get back on track with their lives rather than places that only traumatize and dehumanize those who live and work there.

We also have to face the fact that prisons have become holding tanks for a carceral system that has been out of control since the 1970s, when the number of people sent to prison and the length of sentences began to explode. Empirical evidence now shows that long prison sentences do not deter crime but do cause enormous social harm, costing taxpayers millions upon millions of dollars while having no positive impact on community safety (Travis et al., 2014). A restorative pathway to decarceration and abolition must include pathways of decarceration that address and undo the misplaced policies that sent too many people to prison for insanely long sentences.

- **Establish a re-entry plan at the time of admission for every resident.** Re-entry and reintegration needs to be the focus for every person who goes to prison from the time of their sentencing. A clear outline of what programs exist, how to be successful, and what will move residents toward release should be clear from day one.

- **Make security classifications transparent.** Security classifications determine various aspects of a resident’s life inside: access to communication technology, living units, programming, activities, work, furloughs, and more. We need to have clear direction on what residents need to do to secure lower security classification and ultimately move toward community confinement.

- **Prepare documentation prior to release.** A surprising number of residents lack the basic documents required for normal life on the outside. Prior to their release, caseworkers must ensure that every resident in every facility has

obtained a state ID, birth certificate, and social security card, and is prepared for a driver’s test.

- **Enact Second Look and Second Chance**²⁷ policies to review all sentences after the first ten years of incarceration, as recommended by the American Bar Association.

- **Retroactively cap sentences for emerging adults aged 18-28 years at the time of their crime.** Recent scientific studies suggest that ‘emerging adults’ are still developing neurologically as reflected in the age-crime curve, which shows a peak of criminal activity in the late teens and early twenties, followed by a swift decline in later years. Incarcerating a single 18 year-old with a virtual life sentence costs the state \$2.8-3.7 million. In recognition of these facts, the 130th Maine legislature (2021) passed LD 847,²⁸ which would have provided young adults with options to avoid justice system involvement. The bill was vetoed by Governor Mills.

- **Instate compassionate geriatric release.** Why keep someone in prison when they are no threat to society? The cost of medical care for elderly people in prison is enormous. Allow elderly prisoners to return to their families. While “Maine provides compassionate release to incarcerated individuals with severely incapacitating or terminal medical conditions” (*FAMM Compassionate Release Maine*, 2021), it does not provide for early release of the elderly.

- **Reinstate parole.** Maine abolished parole in 1976. Executive clemency—unused for years—is now the *only* remaining avenue to allow those incarcerated individuals with long sentences who pose no risk to society to carry out their sentences under community supervision rather than in prison. Every

incarcerated person should become eligible to be considered for parole after serving one-third of their sentence.

- **Eliminate life without parole (LWOP) sentences,** which most other countries in the world already prohibit, and which international human rights organizations condemn as cruel and inhumane.

- **Close prisons as numbers dwindle.** Develop a five-year and a ten-year plan for closing prisons and retraining COs for other, better, more meaningful jobs.

We know the challenges that will be involved in shifting carceral culture toward repair, healing, accountability, and personal growth. And yet we believe that we collectively have no other choice. Prisons are institutions originally designed to punish, stigmatize, disappear, and humiliate. Why would we imagine that subjecting people who have caused harm to such a culture would enable them to grow and return to their communities healthy, stable, and self-confident? If we are to live in a world where prisons exist, we need to be thinking good and hard about what we want them to do, how we want them to contribute to community safety, how we want them to contribute to repairing harm, and how we want them to treat people who will be returning to their families and communities. For us, prisons must be spaces of repair and healing, or they will only continue to destroy lives, families, and communities, at our collective expense. And since there is no evidence to suggest that prison sentences should be longer than ten years for most crimes, we urge a retroactive evaluation of lengthy sentences so we can return to their families and communities those people who pose no risk to public safety.

²⁵ For more information see UMaine News article:
²⁶ See <https://extension.umaine.edu/food-health/food-preservation/master-food-preservers/>

²⁷ More information and the full argument can be found at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1smxRm3RtBIMg4tjWxKy3f0xP4pOrnp4EXphk-MVSU0CI/edit#heading=h.cph6h5d5y1ay>
²⁸ Full language of legislation can be found at <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0615&item=2&snum=130>

III. AFTER²⁹

Ensuring those released from prison rejoin their communities safely

What happens when someone leaves prison after years or decades? How are they supposed to adjust to a drastically different world than the one they left? What challenges do they face and what is our responsibility as a society to alleviate those challenges? Should stigmatizing policies and laws continue to target people who have been incarcerated after they have “paid their debt to society” through their incarceration, or should our policies and laws be designed to support rather than hinder a successful re-entry?

Nationwide, people with a criminal conviction are subject to more than 44,000 collateral consequences that hinder their ability to reenter society, support their families, find a job, find housing, obtain a professional license, vote, serve on juries, access credit and educational loans, and much more (*Collateral Consequences: The Crossroads of Punishment, Redemption, and the Effects on Communities*, 2019). The impact is devastating and directly contributes to the appalling percentage of people—79% nationwide!—who are rearrested within 5 years of their release (Butler & Taylor, 2022). Maine has capped some collateral consequences. For example, people with felony convictions are allowed to vote, serve on juries, and run for public office, each of which is an important dimension of civic duty and belonging (Binnall, 2019). Yet, Maine still ranks in the bottom ten states in the Reintegration Report Card by the Restoration of Rights Project (Love, 2022) based on an evaluation of policies on issues like pardon, conviction relief, judicial and administrative certificates of relief, deferred adjudication, non-conviction records, employment, and occupational licensing.

Within the four years between 2015 and

2018, 20% of those released from prison in Maine returned to prison (and this number does NOT include those who returned to jail, which many incarcerated people and corrections personnel will affirm is a regular occurrence). We need to do things differently to ensure that those community members returning from prison are able to support their families, contribute to their communities, and feel a sense of belonging, rather than meeting them with a barrage of stigmatizing rules and policies that are punitive and exclusionary.

In addition to confronting the barriers created by stigma and policy, people leaving prison face a bewildering and destabilizing set of challenges for how to navigate their return to society after time in prison. Too often, people are released with no idea how they are going to live beyond prison. Returning community members are supposed to receive guidance on what services, resources, and connections exist that could support them during their time of transition. Unfortunately, many have not been properly prepared to absorb the inevitable kick in the teeth that awaits them upon their re-entry. Unless they have family and a well-established support system, people step out of prison with next to nothing aside from what they hear from word of mouth or have received from a particularly invested caseworker. Oftentimes, people get down to a week before their release with no bank account, no state ID, and no idea of housing, released with \$50 and a bus ticket. And that’s from prison. When people are released from jail, they get out with NOTHING.

Re-entry in Maine is currently managed through three pathways: straight release, release to probation, or release to home confinement through the Supervised Community Confinement Program (SCCP). In 2021, 712 men and 58 women were released from

prison in Maine (MDOC Data Team, 2022). In the same report, 360 men were released directly into society and 352 were released on probation. For women, 38 were straight releases, and 20 were released on probation. Our rate of success for helping incarcerated people transition to life in the free world is pretty dismal. In 2021, there were 694 new prison admissions, or almost two each day (MDOC Data Team, 2022). In the same report, forty five percent of those admissions were for probation violations (usually for a behavior that would be legal if they were not on probation, like drinking an alcoholic beverage or failing to attend a treatment class that costs money they don’t have).³⁰ With such high return-to-prison statistics, we are doing something wrong. What should we be doing differently?

Stop the Stigma

The “tough on crime” era ushered in a rash of stigmatizing penalties used against people who spent time in prison, including regulations barring them from access to public housing, applying for federal educational loans, and obtaining licenses or certifications for a range of professions. Additionally, prospective employers, renters, educational institutions, and financial institutions can demand information about an applicant’s criminal history. Losing one’s freedom and serving time in prison is the penalty for a conviction; ongoing stigma and exclusion only cause more harm. Here we address some of the cultural dimensions of stigma; we will address other barriers that are driven by and reinforce this stigma in later sections.

• **Eradicate stigmatizing language.** Language matters, and when people returning from prison are identified by terms like “convicted

felon,” “violent offender,” and “criminal,” these labels stick and bite. Once someone is convicted of a crime, their name will forever be associated with that crime through criminal history background checks and the media. Even in death, newspaper obituaries commonly name the offense for which the deceased was once incarcerated, and all too often this is the *only* information provided about them.³¹ Lifelong labeling for a conviction has to stop.

• **Interrupt misogynistic language for formerly incarcerated women.** Women who spent time in a cage face a particularly gendered form of stigma not so readily applied to men, such as being identified as “bad mothers” for having made a poor choice or used drugs. Such negative labels can be psychologically crippling for women reentering from prison who are trying to rebuild their lives while reuniting with their children.

• **Pass Primary Caregiver bills** to allow community-based sentences instead of incarceration for primary caregivers, keeping families together and avoiding the stigma and destruction of prison time.

• **Eradicate stigmatizing policies.** Stigmatizing policies against formerly incarcerated people apply to housing, employment, education, and probation in ways we address in detail below. We have to eradicate the stigma of having been incarcerated to offer a fair chance to people reentering.

• **Make justice-impacted people a protected class.** People returning to society from prison should be identified as a protected class. Incarceration disproportionately impacts people who are poor, traumatized, and struggling with a substance use disorder or mental illness. We know our criminal legal system is racially biased, resulting in the dramatic

³⁰ Of the 694, 333 were men admitted to prison with new crime violations, and 288 were men incarcerated due to probation violations. Forty-seven were women entering prison on new charges, and the final 26 were women reincarcerated for probation violations. A third of the violations for men and half of the violations for women were drug-related offenses.

³¹ A recent, and typical example, is an obituary that appeared in the Bangor Daily News on September 7, 2023, with the headline, “Man Convicted of Murdering His Girlfriend Dies at Maine Prison.” No other information about the deceased was provided. See <https://www.bangordailynews.com/2023/09/07/news/penobscot/mountain-view-correctional-facility-resident-shannon-atwood-dies/>

²⁹ We are grateful to Linda Small of Reentry Sisters, Bruce King of Maine Inside Out, Erica King of CEPP, Andre Hicks of Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (MPAC), Jan Collins of MPAC, the Office of the Secretary of State, Chris of Maine State Prison, Jim of Maine State Prison, and Bruce Noddin of Maine Prisoner Reentry Network (MPRN) for their assistance with this section.

hyperincarceration of people of color. One route to addressing the burden of these inequalities is to offer protected status to those who spent time inside the carceral system, ensuring their criminal history cannot be used against them. To counteract this burden and allow for a meaningful probability of success and reintegration, it is vital to afford them protected or privileged opportunities, such as subsidized housing and employment preferences during the year following their release. This would benefit all of us.

Reform Post-Release Supervision Policies

When people are released from jail or prison, they should be supported in that effort. Current Post Release supervision policies are insufficiently supportive and unnecessarily heavy on surveillance. While this paradigm seems to be changing for the better (with a grateful nod to MDOC leadership for this), the experience of probation is still overwhelmingly one of walking on eggshells, wondering when the return to prison or jail will come, expecting that to be an inevitability rather than an

exception. The feeling connected to post-release supervision is one of a surveillance state waiting to catch you messing up, rather than one invested in your success. If our communities are going to be safe and our returning community members successfully reintegrated, the focus of post-release supervision policies and practices must shift from surveillance to support.

• **Eradicate reincarceration for technical violations of probation.** The stated purpose of probation is “to assist the person to lead a law-abiding life, including, without exception, a condition of probation that the person refrain from criminal conduct” (Title 17-A, §1807: Conditions of Probation, 2019). Too often this assistance turns into another form of punishment. Even if a person’s probation is revoked just a day shy of their completion date, it is as if they never served a day of it (Title 17-A, §1812: Court Hearing on Probation Revocation, 2019). Upon release, they will have to start their entire probation over again. To make this shift real, reincarceration for technical violations must end.



Women who spent time in a cage face a particularly gendered form of stigma not so readily applied to men, such as being identified as “bad mothers” for having made a poor choice or used drugs. Such negative labels can be psychologically crippling for women reentering from prison who are trying to rebuild their lives while reuniting with their children.



• **Abolish income withholding.**³² While we wholeheartedly support victim compensation (addressed below), financially crippling returning community members through the docking of pay for fines, fees, and restitution actually hinders this from happening. Re-entry after incarceration is hard enough as it is. Being able to afford housing, transportation, healthcare, food, and insurance is almost too much to bear before factoring in the difficulty of attaining a job that pays a living wage. Oftentimes, people must work two or three jobs just to get by. Forcing employers to withhold the wages of their workers is damaging not just to the employee, but also to the employer who is forced by the system to inflict pain against their will.

• **Remove fee requirements from probation.**³³ When a person’s freedom is based upon their ability to earn money, this breeds the conditions of desperation. From supervision fees to electronic monitoring and substance testing fees, to the application fee to request permission to travel, a person’s freedom should not be tied to their financial means.

• **Review and revise restitution policies.**³⁴ Rather than facilitating healing, the current restitution policies demand that a person who has been harmed justify their status as a “victim” in order to receive compensation (Title 17-A, §2005: Criteria for Restitution, 2019). This is wrong and must be changed. People who have been harmed should be directly involved in determining what they need to be made whole. Any necessary restitution should go directly to them—not the state or the General Fund.³⁵

• **Expand the Supervised Community Confinement Program (SCCP) to include long-term prisoners.** The American Bar Association says that after 10 years,

incarceration becomes counterproductive (*How Many People Are Spending Over a Decade in Prison?*, 2022). In 2021, the SCCP, which allows a person within 30 months of completing their sentence to transition to home confinement, had a 91% success rate. Maine should remove the 30-month time bar restriction, and review re-entry preparation at 10 years for those serving long sentences. If an incarcerated person has successfully engaged in rehabilitative and transformative engagement over time and been able to establish a support network to welcome them home, why continue to spend \$78,000 a year to keep them incarcerated?

• **Re-establish parole.** Following the positive recommendations of the 2022 Commission to Examine Reestablishing Parole, the Maine Legislature is considering LD 178, An Act to Support Reentry and Reintegration into the Community. This bill would provide incarcerated community members with a clear pathway toward parole eligibility that encourages genuine growth, rehabilitation, and personal transformation. It would create a supportive, restorative, victim-sensitive parole system. Most prisoners (over 95%!) will eventually be released—whether they’re set up for success upon release is the question. Parole offers a rehabilitative pathway toward reintegration into society.³⁶

Housing

Maine faces a massive housing crisis and has exactly zero halfway houses. There are 68 recovery houses, according to Maine Association of Recovery Residences (MARR), ten of which are designated for women, 16 for men, and three designated as neutral.³⁷ None are designated for families. The dearth of re-entry houses brings people without substance use

³² For full language of the law, see <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/17-A/title17-Asec2007.html>

³³ For full language of the law, see <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/17-A/title17-Asec1807.html>

³⁴ A full list of Maine restitution policies can be found at <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/17-A/title17-Ach69sec0.html>

³⁵ For full language of the law, see <https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/17-A/title17-Asec2006.html>

³⁶ For more information, see parole4me.com.

³⁷ We arrived at this number through counting the houses provided at <https://www.mainerecoveryresidences.com/certification-1#/>

issues into close living quarters with people “white-knuckling” their sobriety—jeopardizing the successful re-entry of both. The need for meaningful housing support is clear.

- **Improve casework inside.** Caseworkers may be proactive and work as a team with resource providers and peer support to ease the re-entry of their clients, or they may view re-entry as just a series of boxes that need to be checked. Successful re-entry depends on a uniform and dedicated professional approach to caseworker re-entry support.

- **Establish independently run 3/4 houses.** We need to establish places where people who are coming home from jail or prison can have some semblance of stability, a foundation upon which they can rebuild a life. Formerly incarcerated people trained in peer support could run the houses, with a salary paid by the rent collected from tenants. Who better to support returning citizens than someone with lived experience? For such efforts to be successful, we collectively need to get away from the “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) mentality. If we want to build community safety, we need to build community.

- **Remove all barriers to low-rent, subsidized, and public housing for those with criminal histories.** Remove ‘disqualifying’ felonies and the waiting period (those with felony convictions must wait 5 years before being allowed to apply for Section 8 housing). This is one more way to keep people trapped in a place of desperation and recidivism until the very few left standing have made it out of the anticipated recidivism window. Do not allow insurance companies to discriminate against renters with a criminal history by barring them or raising the insurance rates of the owners.

- **Revive the Fair Chance Housing Act.** LD 1572, The Maine Fair Chance Housing Act, died in the legislature in 2020. It would have “[estab-

lished] the Maine Fair Chance Housing Act, the purpose of which is to ensure that a person is not denied housing based solely on the existence of a history of criminal convictions. This bill prohibits a housing provider from considering an applicant’s criminal history until after the housing provider determines that the applicant meets all other qualifications for tenancy.” These protections are necessary for returning community members.

- **Provide meaningful funding for returning community members.** Incarcerated people in former Maine State Prison had the ability to earn up to \$10,000 a year for their work in the Woodshop/Industries program. Now, the average wage is \$2 an hour, yielding less than half what people used to make. When we take into account basic hygiene and food items, and the occasional sacrificial ability to send some money home to support children or struggling family members, people don’t have much left over to save for their release. We need to open opportunities for paid work at free world wages on the inside so that those reentering have saved enough money for first and last month’s rent and security deposit.

- **Provide low-interest loans with matched funding for first time homebuyers.** Many people don’t know about the Family Development Account Program offered by CASH Maine.³⁸ This program provides \$4:1 matched funds up to \$8000 for qualified savings goals that include first-time home buying. Yet, the ability to save \$2000 for the maximum match still feels desperately out of reach, given the financial struggles of returning community members.

- **Build re-entry bridges for families.** No one is taking women with their kids into recovery homes, forcing women to choose between reuniting with their children or living in a supported home to re-enter. Currently, no visitors are allowed for the first 30 days in

a sober house and there are no reunification support structures for moms with minor children if they have struggled with drug addiction. We need recovery communities, built through no-interest loans and supportive tax and regulatory structures for families so women living in them can be near or with their children. Why can’t communities take over old armories or other buildings and set up supported living environments where women can live with their children AND receive support?

- **Create, publish, and disseminate an annual re-entry information booklet.** A straightforward, comprehensive re-entry information booklet needs to be created, published, and disseminated on an annual basis. This can include housing availability, number of available beds throughout the state, available programming, financial assistance, and more.

Employment

The country is facing a labor shortage. We need to release people from prison who have taken accountability for the harm they caused and are rehabilitated, allowing them to enter the job market and become contributing members of the economy while they serve out their sentences. A recent study from the Colby Laboratory for Economic Studies found that releasing just 100 people on parole in Maine would contribute \$14 million to the Maine economy once they took jobs in the industries most commonly accessed by people leaving prison (Boyd & Donihue, 2023). And yet we keep people in prison for unnecessarily long sentences with no pathway to re-entry in recognition of rehabilitation, and emplace a range of barriers and hindrances that make it difficult for people released from prison to apply for and take up professions for which they received training inside. Maine receives a grade of ‘C’ by the Restoration of Rights Project for our pathway

to employment for those leaving prison (Love, 2022). We have to do better. Here are some first steps:

- **Expand Ban the Box.** Maine’s Fair Chance Employment Act went into effect in November 2021, and forbids employers from prohibiting people with criminal records from applying to an advertised job.³⁹ But once a candidate has been determined to be qualified, then the employer may ask about criminal history, and once a conditional job offer has been extended the employer may conduct a criminal background check and choose to withdraw the offer. We need to go further and ban the box altogether. Do not require job-seekers to reveal a criminal history unless there is an overwhelmingly important reason directly related to public safety. Time served is the punitive repayment we demand of people who have broken the law. Once their sentence is completed, so is their repayment, and past actions should not follow them into the future.

- **Remove all the barriers to certification for professions that are unnecessary for maintaining public safety.** While some professional licensing boards allow for appeals, the disheartening effect of rejection makes appealing a barrier unrealistic given the lived experience of how poorly the appeals process works in prison.

- **Eliminate mandatory waiting periods for many professions.** Right now there is a three-year waiting period to apply for licenses for many trades and professions and a ten-year waiting period to apply for licenses in medicine, dentistry, osteopathy, social work, nursing, chiropractic medicine, physical therapy, alcohol and drug counseling, respiratory care, podiatry, counseling, occupational therapy, massage therapy, radiology, nursing home care, pharmacy, and emergency medical services (Title 5, §5303: Time Limit on Consideration of Prior Criminal Conviction, n.d.).⁴⁰ Some of these are professions for which incarcerated people

38 Details can be found at <https://www.cashmaine.org/build-your-savings/family-development-account-program/>

39 Full language of the law can be found at <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0845&item=1&snm=130>
40 For full language of the law, visit <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/5/title5sec5303.html>

receive training inside, like drug and alcohol counseling, therapeutic and peer counseling, Certified Intentional Peer Support (CIPS) training, CCAR Recovery Coach Academy,⁴¹ and Personal Support Specialist training for hospice volunteers. However, society is denied their expertise because of these unnecessary and punitive waiting periods.

- **Integrate the business community with release.** There should be direct communication between employers and corrections facilities that enables residents to build connections with potential employers, grow their professional networks, and receive professional trainings to prepare for employment upon release.

- **Allow incarcerated people to hold jobs on the outside.** As incarcerated people develop or hone their professional skills through educational and rehabilitative programming inside, we need to open pathways toward employment in meaningful professions at free world wages, including for those held at medium and maximum-security facilities. There is no reason incarcerated people cannot teach college, consult in areas of their specialty, offer contract services, or hold regularly waged remote jobs for which they are qualified. Allowing incarcerated people to hold normal jobs at free world wages will ease their re-entry, allow them to develop their professional skills and build an employment history, support their families, fulfill any victim's compensation they owe, and become taxpaying members of society. Why wouldn't we want this?

- **Educate business owners and managers about existing incentives.** A number of incentives currently exist that support the hiring of currently or formerly incarcerated people. For example, there is a federal bonding program that provides special insurance to employers and the Worker Opportunity Tax Credit. Also, there are several benefits cited

in the California Employers Fair Chance Hiring Toolkit that include: performance on the job, loyalty to the company, and boosts to the economy and individual productivity (*California Employers' Fair Chance Hiring Toolkit*, 2018).⁴²

- **Provide Universal Basic Income (UBI).** UBI seems both necessary and doable. In fact, there are nine programs currently in effect in the U.S. that engage in universal basic income/cash transfer programs (Napoletano, 2022). To help reduce poverty rates, improve employment prospects, reduce food and security, and improve health, UBI can help us move towards the future we want.

Transportation

Just like everyone else, anyone returning to society from prison has to use a car in order to search for work, visit their probation officer, and attend to the daily demands of life (e.g., grocery shopping, medical care, caring for children or aging parents, etc.). Given the impoverishment and removal from the financial sector that comes with incarceration, obtaining a loan is challenging, and many people are forced into subprime loans at high interest rates. Financing a car can end up costing more than housing (Livingston & Ross, 2022). Because the debt load that so many carry from buying a car is so high, solving transportation problems for those re-entering society from prison or jail will also help everyone else.

- **Invest in public transport.** Maine used to have a much more developed system of public transportation linking rural and urban areas. There is no reason we cannot reinvest in a public infrastructure plan to reverse the decades of prioritizing individual automobility, especially given the realities of climate change and the costs of gas and vehicle maintenance.

- **Develop private-public transport partnerships.** The government can work with the private sector (Uber, Lyft, car rental companies, rides arranged directly by employers, etc.) to create and support a stop and ride system that gets people to their jobs.

- **Open a low-interest loan fund** for car loans for those below the poverty line. Poor people are unduly hampered by the high cost of cars, loans, and insurance. Until our public transportation infrastructure is better developed, poor people, including those returning from jail and prison, should be able to access low-interest loans to ensure their access to transportation.

- **De-link traffic violations from probation revocations.** Since “any contact with police can be rendered a violation of the terms of [probation or] parole,” (Livingston & Ross, 2022, p. 62) a simple traffic violation can send someone back to jail or prison. This should never happen.

- **Remove excessive fines for traffic violations.** In the U.S., you cannot be jailed for failing to pay your debts, and in Maine you cannot be jailed for a traffic violation. And yet a failure to pay a fine can mushroom into late penalties, interest, a court warrant, a “failure to appear in court” charge, a license suspension, a fee for reinstatement, compounding court fees, and, finally, arrest for driving without a license (or driving after suspension).

- **Limit license suspensions.** Maine currently has 64 violations that lead to a license suspension, 59 of which carry fines that vary from \$50-200 to lift the suspension. These fines do not include court fees. In 2021 alone, Maine issued 36,847 license suspensions (*Report of Suspensions for Year Ending December 2021*, 2022). License revocations should be extremely limited, and only for situations that are truly dangerous to public safety, not for petty fines and infractions.

Medical Care and Wellbeing

Prison is an unhealthy environment that produces poor health outcomes. Healthcare in prison is generally poor and incarceration is traumatizing. Furthermore, post-incarceration syndrome (PICS) is a mental disorder that occurs in those currently incarcerated or recently released; symptoms are most severe for those who encountered extended periods of solitary confinement and incarceration (*Post Incarceration Syndrome*, n.d.). Several facets of PICS include: institutionalized personality traits, post-traumatic stress disorder, antisocial personality traits, social-sensory deprivation syndrome, and substance use disorders. Dealing with PICS requires a holistic approach to medical care and wellbeing.

- **Assign health navigators to track the health care needs of those re-entering.** This is perhaps most important for those managing substance use challenges. A person is not likely to remain free if they do not receive support in addressing the underlying want/need that drives them to use substances. A health navigator that starts with a person on the inside and transitions with them to the outside will raise the likelihood of their successful re-entry.

- **Develop a transitional healthcare plan.** Maintaining prescription medications after re-entry is challenging. Corrections medical providers can change or refuse to fulfill prescriptions ordered by doctors, and prescribed medications are only provided for a few weeks upon re-entry. What happens after that is totally uncoordinated; there is no plan for how to transition medications from the inside to the outside. Furthermore, women have unique needs with regard to reproductive healthcare that often go unmet while incarcerated. Routine appointments for mammograms or pap smears involve shackles and jumpsuits, and many women refuse. Corrections facilities do not match up genders for appointments, and women may be taken to appointments by male transport officers, which makes some women—

41 For more information, visit <https://addictionrecoverytraining.org/>

42 For an in-depth learning experience on numerous benefits for companies to hire fair chance workers, business leaders can check out Jobs for the Future's Fair Chance Employer Training Program at <https://www.jff.org/work/center-for-justice-economic-advancement/>.

especially those with trauma histories—extremely uncomfortable. Trauma from intimate reproductive healthcare inside extends to the outside.

• **Extend MaineCare for the first year of re-entry.** If a person does not meet MaineCare requirements upon re-entry, they go without healthcare. For the first year after re-entry, the threshold needs to change for those who are working multiple low income jobs that do not carry insurance but who earn enough aggregate income to put them over the threshold. Everyone re-entering should be covered for a year.

Community Support

The world doesn't stop when people go to jail or prison. An expectation that a person stepping out of jail or prison should immediately catch their stride will ensure disappointment. Without support, mentoring, and care during re-entry, failure is an approximately 76% guarantee. To interrupt these cycles of recidivism, we propose a few potential solutions.

• **Support better coordinated re-entry services.** Maine Prisoner Re-entry Network currently employs three full-time Community Re-integration Specialists (CRS's), who support about 10% of the re-entering population from Maine's prisons. Substantial funding is

needed to support the hiring of more CRS's throughout the state.

• **Initiate re-entry community support groups in every county.** Of the 40,000 people cycling in and out of Maine's jails each year, and the several hundred more released from Maine's prisons each year, people are coming home every day in every county across the state. Many people who wind up in jails and prisons never had a support network to begin with or lost those networks in the wake of harm. If we really want to improve community safety, we need community-specific re-entry support groups to surround and embrace people who are coming home to smooth the transition, provide spaces of connection, and offer safety for those who need help—start a group, join a group, or support a group.

• **Offer free life skills courses in every county.** Many returning community members need help learning how to secure clothing, attain and use phones and technology, housing, food and nutrition, cooking, counseling, a job, therapy, counseling, financial literacy, and building a trusted network. Zoom is a major asset. Classes can now be held virtually anywhere and can be open to participants from anywhere.

• **Implement a reparative reintegration process.** Whenever someone goes to jail or prison, someone is hurt. Family members

of incarcerated people suffer right along with them. Reparative processes are needed that support family healing and reunification efforts. Community Mediation of Maryland has created a great evidence-based re-entry mediation process model that has also been reproduced with success in Massachusetts. Restorative justice organizations might be well suited to take on this task.

• **Provide special support for returning mothers.** Many women sent to prison are often household heads and primary caretakers of minor children and aging parents. Typically, women shoulder much larger burdens within their families, with the expectation that upon release they will automatically slide into former primary caretaker roles. Returning mothers need extra support in all of the ways mentioned above.

Reform the criminal code and amend the Maine State Constitution

Maine's 1976 reform of the criminal code resulted in more people going to prison for longer sentences, instituted life sentences without the existence of parole, and dramatically lengthened the amount of time that young adults spend behind bars. That reform, instituted in the context of the 'tough on crime era' and 'War on Drugs' era, has resulted in harm, trauma, and intergenerational impoverishment that is totally unnecessary for maintaining public safety. Per capita expenditures on incarceration now outpace expenditures on education, mental health treatment, and substance use disorder supports. The reform also eliminated the ability of the state to adjust sentences in recognition of rehabilitation and public safety. In order to correct the mistakes of the old reform, it is time for another reform of Maine's criminal legal system to prioritize public safety over punishment, rehabilitation over warehousing, restorative pathways to re-entry rather than absurdly long sentences and exclusionary stigmas, and

support for those who have been harmed. Let's start with these changes:

• **Retroactively eradicate 'truth in sentencing' laws,** which mandate that one must serve the amount of time ordered by the court, without any allowance for rehabilitation, illness, family needs, or the public good;

• **Retroactively eradicate life sentences** since in Maine these are de facto life without parole sentences, which are viewed almost everywhere else in the world as abhorrent, cruel, and unusual;

• **Retroactively eradicate lengthy sentences for emerging adults,** in the recognition that young adults are still maturing and their likelihood of committing harm drops dramatically after their mid-30s;

• **Vastly reduce the length of sentences,** in recognition of the recommendations of legal experts like the American Bar Association, which calls for sentencing review after ten years;

• **Vastly reduce the number of offenses that carry a prison sentence;**

• **Cap all sentences** at 45 years;


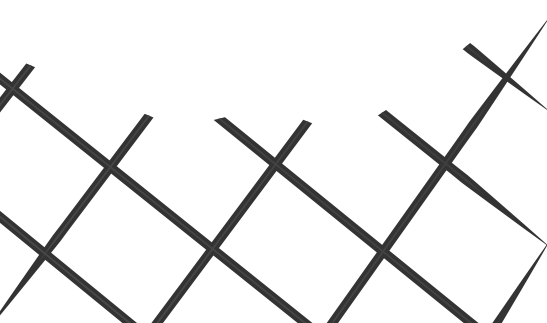
• **Retroactively end accomplice liability** for felony murder;

• **End revocations of probation and community supervision** for everything that is not directly related to public safety;

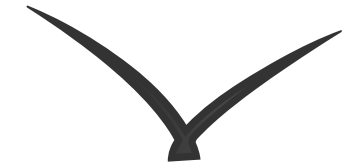
• **Reinstate presumptive parole** so that people who pose no risk to public safety can return to society as contributing family and community members;

• **Expand good time credits** to allow people to return to their communities sooner;

• **Amend the Constitution** to allow people to return home before the end of their sentence when experts determine they can safely return to their families and communities. Currently the only way to release people before the termination of their sentence is through gubernatorial clemency, which has hardly ever happened. We need other options: through the courts, a board of experts, the medical community, and a parole board.



Typically, women shoulder much larger burdens within their families, with the expectation that upon release they will automatically slide into former primary caretaker roles. Returning mothers need extra support in all of the ways mentioned above.



Conclusion

Looking into the future, we are struck by the Maine governor's recent budget. This budget includes a \$45 million biannual increase for Corrections, yet minimal increases in funding for mental health support and support for those who have experienced trauma. Let's imagine for a moment what Maine's communities could look like if that \$45 million went to support restorative justice and restorative practicing organizations and community-based organizations that offer supportive care?

We long for the day when our gubernatorial budget will reflect the needs of Maine's community members. In this article we did not cover all of the needs nor all of the solutions. This is but the first swing at radical visioning of what a healed Maine might look like. We are moving forward into this future with a determined hope that, even if we don't see it to its full fruition, we might see the first steps toward a restorative, decarcerated, healing-centered future for Maine.

Leo Hylton is a PhD student, restorative justice scholar-practitioner and consultant, guest lecturer, columnist, and prison abolitionist currently incarcerated in Maine State Prison.

Catherine Besteman, an abolitionist anthropologist at Colby College, coordinates the Freedom & Captivity Initiative and recently published *Militarized Global Apartheid*.

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