

# Maine Women's Lobby

THE VOICE OF MAINE WOMEN

Testimony of Whitney Parrish

Maine Women's Lobby

In support of LD 1684

An Act To Clarify the Right to Counsel for Juveniles and Improve Due Process for Juveniles

May 20, 2019

Senator Carpenter, Representative Bailey, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary: my name is Whitney Parrish, Director of Policy and Program for the Maine Women's Lobby. The Maine Women's Lobby is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, statewide membership organization devoted to raising the economic, social, and political status of Maine's 678,000 women and girls.

I am here to speak to you in strong support of *An Act To Clarify the Right to Counsel for Juveniles and Improve Due Process for Juveniles*.

In my years as a prisoner rights advocate, I have rarely met a presently or formerly incarcerated person who has not talked about how their time as a juvenile detainee traumatized them and shaped their life path, leading them back to incarceration, increased poverty, and disadvantage as an adult. As a youth trafficking survivor advocate, I watched countless female-identified clients enter Long Creek Youth Development Center in a revolving door fashion for infractions related to survival, be it stealing a chicken sandwich from Walmart to offering sexual favors for a couch upon which to sleep. You will hear no lack of anecdotal evidence today to support the notion that the carceral system only hurts children, young people, and families. As we know, there is mounting research to support it as well. A recent study of youth in detention found that 92.5 percent of youth had experienced at least one trauma, 84 percent experienced more than one trauma, and over 55 percent reported being exposed to trauma six or more times.<sup>1</sup> These traumas include witnessing and experiencing violence (such as sexual violence) and being threatened with violence. For youth of color, the numbers rise.

Many times, these young people, especially young women, are not being sent into a correctional setting for criminogenic factors. They are committed as a matter of "safety" to leverage services that exist very limitedly or not at all. Putting a child in a contained, punitive space with lack or absence of natural and professional resources and supports becomes a catalyst for actual or increased criminogenic activity, not to mention steeply declining health and well-being. This perpetuates a potentially lifelong cycle of poverty, mental health challenges, substance use disorder, and recidivism from which so many never

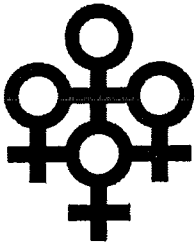
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<sup>1</sup> PTSD, Trauma, and Comorbid Psychiatric Disorders in Detained Youth. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.ojjdp.gov/pubs/239603.pdf>

295 Water Street, Suite 10, Augusta, ME 04330 • 207.622.0851

wparrish@mainewomen.org

www.mainewomen.org



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escape. For many of us in this field, we know that trauma is the real gateway drug. We know that the trauma inflicted by incarceration at any age, but *especially* before the brain has fully developed and when children need stability the most, leads to damning consequences for these young people, their families, and entire communities.

As we build sustainable paths to decarceration, we need effective, comprehensive policy to support our children, not push them further into trauma and lifelong disadvantage. We believe that LD 1684 is that type of policy. These young people need to know that they are seen and heard by the very people put in power to protect them. You are some of the very people who are here to protect them. We strongly urge you to vote ought to pass. Thank you for your time.

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wparrish@mainewomen.org  
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