



Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (MPAC)  
maineprisoneradvocacy.org

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maineprisoneradvocacy@yahoo.com

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**Contact: Judy Garvey 207-374-2437  
Jim Bergin 207-374-3608**

## **Advocacy group opposes bill to move prisoners out of Maine**

AUGUSTA -- The Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (M-PAC) will vigorously oppose a bill that would allow the Department of Corrections Commissioner, for the first time in Maine's history, to ship Maine's prisoners to out-of-state corporate prisons "for any purpose," coalition leaders said Friday.

The proposed law, known as L.D. 1095, titled, "An Act to Facilitate the Construction and Operation of Private Prisons by Authorizing the Transport of (Maine) Prisoners Out of State" – and referred to as "the corporate prison deal" by M-PAC – comes about as the result of a deal with Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) as a prerequisite to building a private, for-profit federal transfer center prison in Milo or another Maine town. Milo officials have been trying to entice CCA to build a 2,000-bed prison for federal inmates from other states in their Piscataquis County town.

"This new legislation is sweeping and meets the terms of the deal that CCA demands – to move Maine prisoners to other states – before it will build a prison in Maine," says M-PAC co-director Judy Garvey of Blue Hill.

In voting for this deal to pass, legislators would agree to provide CCA with Maine's prisoners to fill vacancies in facilities it operates in distant parts of the country. In return CCA would come into a Maine town like Milo, with high unemployment, and build a \$150 million prison to house 2,000 or more in-transit federal prisoners, almost doubling the prisoner population in Maine

and the population of Milo as well.

According to their December 2010 Maine Lobbyist Registration, Joshua Tardy and James Mitchell of Mitchell Tardy Government Affairs will be aiding CCA's efforts. The new lobbying group lists one client: Corrections Corporation of America.

Earlier attempts by former Gov. John Baldacci to transfer Maine prisoners to a private prison in Oklahoma were defeated. Baldacci then won approval to consolidate Maine prisons and county jails, which apparently resolved his concerns about overcrowding at state prisons. Gov. Paul LePage has now voiced support for the construction of a private prison in the town of Milo as a way to create jobs and boost the local economy. But critics see this form of presumed economic growth as ineffective and a double-edge sword. Both Baldacci and LePage received campaign contributions from CCA.

Rev. Stan Moody of Manchester, a former chaplain at Maine State Prison and former state legislator, sympathizes with the economic issues: "I recognize that Milo has suffered more than most from decades of economic bypass, but do they really want a hundred low-paying jobs to house other people's failures? Does Milo get 100 non-manufacturing jobs on the backs of hundreds of Maine families and loved ones of prisoners sent off to CCA prisons too far away for visits and too far away to know of human rights abuses?"

Numerous reports by former CCA prison towns state that the expected jobs often do not materialize. CCA does not hire individuals over 37 yrs old, and generally brings in staff from other locations to fill high paying administrative and supervisory positions.

According to Jim Bergin, M-PAC's co-director, "A small town in rural Virginia that allowed a prison to be built, with the hope of economic recovery, had difficulty attracting other businesses, experienced a decline in property values, an increase in domestic problems, and in lieu of attracting other forms of development, was considering building another prison; in effect, becoming a form of penal colony."

The American Correctional Officer Intelligence Association debunked myths about economic upswings in CCA prison towns: "After a sordid 20-year history there is no proof that supports these contentions."

Motivated by the need for increased employment, Milo Town Manager Jeff Gahagan has stated that, "even a hundred jobs would help the local unemployment level."

Given today's economy Garvey agrees with the need for innovative

sources of employment, but sees the negative consequences of shipping prisoners away from family and community as "counter-productive in lowering Maine's crime and reducing recidivism as well as impacting the humane treatment of men and women who are transferred as part of a quid pro quo to contribute to CCA's bottom line."

Specifically, many families already find it difficult to make the long treks to some of Maine's prisons and fear if their loved ones are taken out of Maine, they might not ever be able to visit them, Garvey said. "We can only imagine how much more difficult those efforts would be should any Maine prisoner be moved out of state," she said. "This breaks up families and causes severe strain on children of prisoners."

M-PAC gives a voice to Maine prisoners and their families and works toward humane, ethical, and positive changes to the state's corrections system in order to improve safety in Maine communities and lower tax burdens.

Another major concern to families is the overall lack of accountability and transparency in how Maine's prisoners would be treated in other state's systems, according to Bergin, considering the difficulty M-PAC has encountered in getting timely and accurate information about problems inside Maine's own prisons.

Trudy Ferland of the First Universalist Church of Pittsfield, which will host a May 5<sup>th</sup> community forum on corporate prisons, says, "Profiteering from the incarceration and trading of human beings compromises public safety, corrupts justice, and is not in line with Maine values."

Many of Maine's 4,000 county and state prisoners are elderly, sick, and disabled, while many others need chemical addiction treatment to successfully return to their families and communities after sentences end, Bergin said.

In a related development, Garvey and other M-PAC leaders said they have been encouraged after a recent meeting with new Corrections Commissioner Joseph Ponte. The prisoner advocates were able to share with Ponte an overview of their concerns for Maine prisoners, several who have died in state custody over the past two years. Ponte assured advocates that he would be exploring positive changes to the system to make it more accountable.

For more information on L.D. 1095, or to contact M-PAC members, see the group's website at [www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org](http://www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org)