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NEWS RELEASE

Advocacy group hails defeat of private-prison legislation

ELLSWORTH -- Advocates for Maine prison reform praised a Monday unanimous decision by the Legislature's Criminal Justice Committee to reject a bill to allow a private prison in Maine.

However, members of the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition remained concerned because the committee apparently defeated the bill, L.D. 1095, after learning that no private companies showed an interest in building a private prison geared toward serving elderly prisoners who need health monitoring and care.

The bill was not defeated on philosophical grounds that private prisons are not beneficial to the state or its citizens, a position held by MPAC and other reform advocates.

"The need for help for aging prisoners is due in large part to Maine having no parole," Judy Garvey, MPAC co-coordinator, said Tuesday. "This points out the overall need to review sentencing guidelines."

Committee members and corrections officials also conceded they could not find any Maine nursing homes willing to open their doors to sick and aging prisoners, while admitting that the state's prisons are not equipped to provide the growing medical and other special-care needs of an aging prison population.

Garvey said she is encouraged that the Friends Committee on Maine Public Policy and the Maine Council of Churches are organizing more discussion about sentencing guidelines on January 28 at the Alford Center in Waterville. (For more information, please contact leslieam55@gmail.com.)

Jim Bergin, co-coordinator of M-PAC, said the group still has concerns about privatization attempts through L.D. 287 – a review of services currently

being done by state employees that could be contracted out – which will be coming up in the State and Local Government Committee.

Trudy Ferland of Pittsfield, who led several forums about the pitfalls of for-profit prisons, is grateful for the defeat of L.D. 1095, stating: "Profiteering from the incarceration and trading of human beings compromises public safety, corrupts justice, and is not in line with Maine values."

The private-prison bill was held over from last year in an effort to corral more support for it, according to committee member Sen. Stanley Gerzofsky, D-Brunswick.

Initially, the bill was introduced as a way to create jobs in rural Milo, northwest of Bangor. But early opponents argued a private prison should not be considered economic development anywhere in Maine. They were even more concerned that such a plan would make it challenging for family members and friends of prisoners to visit them in such a remote area.

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

For more information on MPAC or to join in advocacy efforts, see the group's web site at maineprisoneradvocacy.org.

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