

Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (MPAC)
maineprisoneradvocacy.org

maineprisoneradvocacy@yahoo.com

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Contact: Judy Garvey or Jim Bergin 207-374-3608

**Advocacy Group Invited to Maine State Prison:
M-PAC Invited to MSP to View Commissioner Ponte's New Policies**

WARREN -- For the first time since Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (M-PAC) was formed, representatives were invited to tour Maine State Prison on October 21st. M-PAC's Co-Coordinator, Judy Garvey, reports, "We attribute the increase in direct communications with Maine's Department of Corrections to Commissioner Joe Ponte's proactive openness in addressing systemic problems."

After a reception and in-depth presentations by a dozen unit managers, captains, deputy wardens, and a few of the integral staff, Ponte, Warden Barnhart, and others led M-PAC Co-Coordinator Jim Bergin, Trudy Ferland, and Garvey on a tour of MSP that included the SMU (special management unit), Mental Health Unit, Health Clinic, and several inmate housing units. Meeting with dozens of inmates and staff during 3.5 hours on site allowed M-PAC to view policy changes since Commissioner Ponte's direction began. M-PAC members, at the Commissioner's invitation, agreed to visit additional sections of the prison on future visits.

In a recent statement to members, M-PAC reported that a move to more transparency is now in place for advocates and the outside world. "The new Commissioner's changes indicate that he is very serious about altering philosophy and policies, and is working toward positive emphasis on restorative actions and rehabilitation of individuals rather than old-style warehousing," says Judy Garvey. "Yet, as would be expected, all is in flux and many people -- staff and inmates -- are frustrated as things change quickly from week-to-week."

The day of M-PAC's visit the SMU (referred to as solitary confinement by M-PAC) had 34 inmates, with some leaving soon. "This change was unanticipated

two years ago," says Jim Bergin. "Even though there is much unknown territory ahead, we are grateful to see that SMU practices are changing, and hope that SMU housing -- like the juvenile detention centers' former solitary units -- will soon be closed entirely for all but 72-hour evaluations."

Garvey, who communicates regularly with DOC administration on specific advocacy issues, is also positive: "Hope is present. We expect that it will take much longer before results can be objectively evaluated, and we anticipate many more changes as this unfolds. We are grateful for Joe Ponte's honesty with staff, inmates, and advocates, and are relieved that M-PAC's concerns are met with positive responses. Flexibility and change are being adapted to by the staff members that we consider the most professional, and they have our support."

At the same time, advocates throughout the state have sympathy with inmate and staff concerns about changes. "The prison is, after all, their home and workplace," says Garvey, "and everyone feels better when routines can be counted on and mutual respect prevails." Some inmate leaders told M-PAC representatives on Friday that, "We have no schedule we can count on. They change the way they do things virtually every day. We didn't get out of our cells this morning until they were ready to release to chow, and we're told this can happen at every meal. The biggest problem is that no one knows what they are going to be doing from one minute to the next."

Inmates, staff, and advocates seem to be in agreement that it is too early to weigh the results of change, and that tensions can be high as new policies are implemented. "Concerns remain at this point," says Bergin. "Some staff are purportedly retaliating against inmates because of resistance to changes being asked of staff by the new de-escalation techniques and emphasis on respectful resolution. While it is evident that positive policies are being adopted, M-PAC will continue to report incidents as we hear of them."

Garvey agrees, and adds, "On October 21st Maine's DOC lifted away more shadows that have covered dysfunctional practices at the prison for decades. This is a victory for all Maine citizens, including the DOC administration, staff, and prisoners. It lifts Maine up further from the darkness of historical abuses behind those closed walls. As the results of these changes are evaluated by reductions in recidivism and negative incidents in the prisons we anticipate that Maine could become a model for treatment of prisoners for the rest of the country."

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