




MAINE YOUTH
JUSTICE

A New Vision for Youth Justice in Maine

“It is up to our society to build the community and conditions around youth to reflect what we want youth to feel and where we hope and dream they will go in life.”

A photograph of a brick wall with graffiti, a brick walkway, and a trash can. The wall is made of reddish-brown bricks and has some blue and white graffiti on it. A black trash can with a yellow 'Litter' sign and a recycling symbol is on the brick walkway. A black metal post is also visible on the walkway. The background shows some bare trees and a white building.

As Maine seeks to reform its youth justice system, Maine Youth Justice (MYJ) urges our elected leaders to embrace a comprehensive vision of youth justice that seeks to build equity and promote opportunities for youth from under-served communities throughout the state. Maine currently spends \$17 million a year to imprison young people at the the Long Creek Youth Development Center. We believe that Maine must close Long Creek and reinvest in a new model of youth justice that promotes healing and community well-being. *As one MYJ member said:*

“We can’t live in fear of retaliation of giving oppressed groups what they need to thrive. We need to do the healing as a country to accept that we have done some things wrong and now be brave and find solutions.”

lets
love our
community

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SOLUTION 1

Invest in Our Communities.

We must fix the root causes of why we, as young people, become involved in Maine's youth justice system. First, we must acknowledge that poverty and a lack of opportunity drive youth incarceration. We must transform communities so that all youth have the chance to thrive. Our neighborhoods need more trees, parks and playgrounds. We need more safe spaces in our communities where we can engage in positive activities that we enjoy. Maine should invest in neighborhood programs such as Tree Street and Boys and Girls Clubs and other drop-in after school programs where we can have access to the arts and the outdoors and where we can participate in cultural specific activities.

People should be able to have access to services and supports that they need in our communities without system involvement. Maine should support more recovery centers that are run by people in recovery. We must ensure that all youth have access to health care, including mental health care. In addition, young people cannot be healthy and stable if we do not have safe, clean, up to date and affordable housing. Our state should create policies that push landlords to accept state subsidies and also create more cooperative housing and programs to promote home ownership.

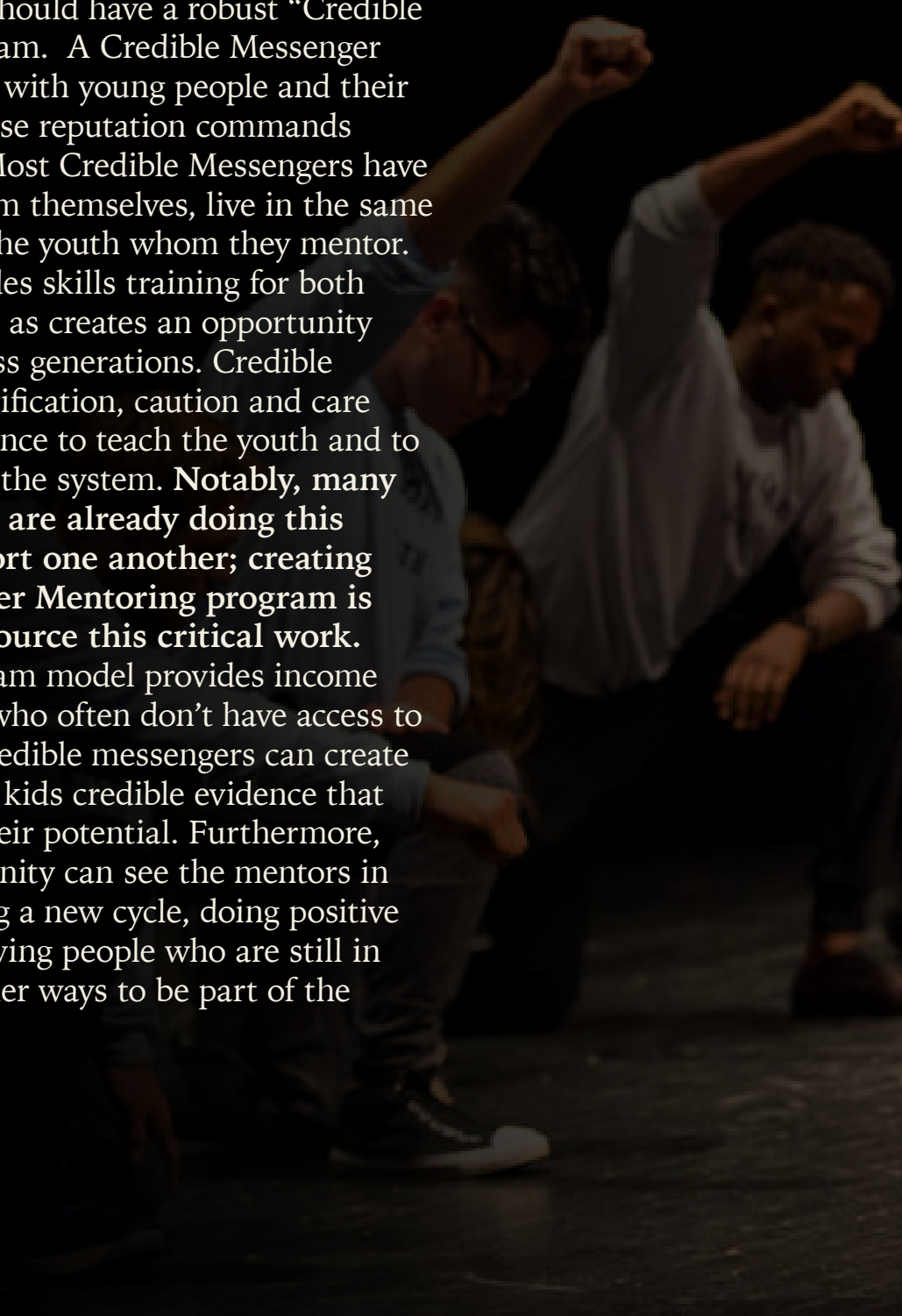
Reimagine the Role of Police.

We feel less safe when we have police constantly patrolling our neighborhoods and schools. We want to live in communities free of police violence and over-surveillance. Police should not be the first responders in every situation in which youth and their families are in crisis. We should put in place safety nets in the community so that people don't feel that their only option is to call the police. We should find and train community members to serve as first responders, community leaders and healers. When people respond in a way that recognizes a person's humanity and worth, we can help de-escalate situations and prevent further harm. Furthermore, we should remove police officers from schools.

SOLUTION 3

Invest in Credible Messengers.

Every community in Maine should have a robust “Credible Messenger” mentoring program. A Credible Messenger is someone who can connect with young people and their families and is someone whose reputation commands respect in the community. Most Credible Messengers have experienced the justice system themselves, live in the same communities, and look like the youth whom they mentor. This mentoring model provides skills training for both mentors and mentees as well as creates an opportunity to grow the community across generations. Credible Messengers use comfort, clarification, caution and care along with their own experience to teach the youth and to show them a path outside of the system. **Notably, many people in our communities are already doing this type of mentoring to support one another; creating a formal Credible Messenger Mentoring program is a way to recognize and resource this critical work.** Most importantly, this program model provides income for system-impacted people who often don’t have access to meaningful employment. Credible messengers can create a team around kids that give kids credible evidence that they reach their goals and their potential. Furthermore, now members of our community can see the mentors in a different light — as creating a new cycle, doing positive work helping youth and showing people who are still in the system that there are other ways to be part of the community around them.





Shut Down the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

For many youth — particularly Black and LGBTQ youth — school has been a deeply demoralizing and alienating experience. As one Maine Youth Justice youth organizer explained: “For some kids, schools are a system that crushes your dreams based on color, money, and labelsYou are labeled immediately in school based on where you are from and so you have to walk a straighter line to prove yourself in schools, and it is tiring.”

Our state should take concrete steps to ensure that every student is offered an education that not only helps to ensure their future economic security but also helps to build community. For example, schools should teach us real life skills and connect us with internships in the community. The state should seek to employ more educators with the end goal of smaller class sizes where teachers have deeper connection to their students.. Our state should encourage school districts to hire teachers, coaches, and advocates from diverse backgrounds — including individuals who have been impacted by youth justice, foster care and homelessness. In addition, schools should transform outdated curriculum — particularly history lessons — to make sure that we are learning history that is both true and relevant to our lives. Finally, the state should mandate cultural competency training for teachers in order to acknowledge culturally different ways of learning and to promote other measures to create a more inclusive school environment for youth of color and LGBTQ youth.

An important way to end the school-to-prison pipeline is to end suspensions and expulsions. Keeping young people in school will save money for our communities; youth who are out of school utilize more costly public resources. In the words of MYJ youth leader: “It is so simple, have the schools even tried to change this? This is the job of schools to keep kids in school and invested in their future. Schools should be working for 100 percent of their children...no child should be thrown away.”

Fund Programs to Divert Youth from Arrest, Prosecution, and Incarceration.

Maine should redirect correctional funds towards expanding diversion programs that provide community-based alternatives to processing youth in court or prevent youth from deeper involvement in the justice system. Since every community is different, not all solutions from the state should look the same. Rather than offering a “one-size-fits all” response, we should provide a range of community options to address the different needs of young people and their families within the communities where they live. Furthermore, diversion programs should not “widen the net” by sending youth further downstream into the system for not complying with program mandates. When someone in our family is struggling, community programs should address the needs of our whole family. We should train community workers to look at the root causes of what is happening in our home and in the community and to help us and our families identify and overcome barriers to access. Most importantly, the state must equip community programs to identify trauma in our lives and support us to take steps to dismantle this trauma.

Create a New Model for Small, Community-based Residential Programs.

If a child is truly unsafe in the community, secure confinement may be needed for a short period of time (no longer than six months). In these rare cases, the state should place young people in small home-like environment with no more than 4 youth that are close/based in their community. The small size of these residential programs would allow for individualized services to youth and their families -- recognizing that everyone is different and not everyone's care should look the same. Moreover, these programs should be trauma-informed and base their practices on a knowledge of adolescent brain development and on a genuine care for the outcomes of young people and their families. The goal of these programs is to evaluate the child's needs, look at their environment through a trauma lens and make a plan for their success in reintegrating into the community and being a positive community member. Finally, we must bring youth home from out of state placements and make sure that we serve all young people in their communities.

SOLUTION 7

Take the Responsibility for Youth Justice and Community Reinvestment out of the Maine Department of Corrections.

The Maine Department of Corrections is not the appropriate agency to administer community reinvestment funds or to oversee the creation of new community-based programs for youth and families. We recommend that Maine create a new cabinet-level agency to take responsibility for youth justice and community reinvestment. When the state closes Long Creek, it should put the \$17 million in savings in a lock box and require that the new agency allocates this money for community reinvestment. This new agency must prioritize transparency and community accountability. The agency should work closely with youth and other community partners to design a process to ensure community involvement in deciding how the state spends reinvestment dollars. Organizers at MYJ feel strongly that DHHS and DOC have failed to administer justice to their communities and they should not administer these funds.

SOLUTION 8

Repurpose Long Creek.

Long Creek has long been a symbol of Maine's failed youth justice system. There has been so much brutality and trauma in the building, that many MYJ members feel that it should be completely demolished. However, other MYJ members believe that repurposing the building would be a powerful symbol of healing and community reinvestment. **We strongly believe that the Department of Corrections should not convert Long Creek into a women's prison.** We recommend that the state tear down part of the building and redo the layout of the rest of the building to make it look completely different. Most importantly, the state should renovate Long Creek to benefit and support a community in healing — such as converting it into affordable housing or a community center.







Maine Inside Out (MIO) has offered arts-based programs at Maine's juvenile detention facility, Long Creek Youth Development Center (LCYDC), for the past ten years. MIO has worked with hundreds of youth incarcerated at the facility and collaborated with these young people upon release, their families and their communities to envision what is possible by creating and sharing powerful original theater inside LCYDC, across the state, and nationally.

Maine Inside Out helps to lead **Maine Youth Justice**, a nonpartisan campaign to end youth incarceration in Maine and invest in a range of community-based alternatives that respond to young people's needs, support families, and build community in support of community alternatives to youth incarceration.

Learn more and join us at: maineyouthjustice.org
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