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Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

My name is Carol Larson. I am a resident of Gorham. I am testifying on behalf of MUUSAN, the Maine Unitarian Universalist State Advocacy Network. Naneen Chace-Ortiz will be reading my remarks today in support of LD 696.

My interest in this issue began during my past employment as a therapist by the Massachusetts DOC at two medium security male facilities. Both employed segregated and sometimes very inhumane confinement of inmates.

We Americans publicly proclaim our belief in our constitutional promise of justice for all, including those who have violated the law. Common practices which prevail within our criminal justice system stand in stark contrast to these high ideals. The dissonance between our stated beliefs and the treatment of individuals is nowhere more evident than in the use of solitary confinement and segregated confinement.

The confinement of an inmate is often ordered by corrections persons with no opportunity for representation or due process and is often extended repeatedly if the inmate acts out or protests. There is often no universal standard for confining an inmate, often no guidelines for how long or under what conditions he/she may remain confined, and very little concern for long-term damage the person may sustain as a result.

Just as medical professionals adhere to a standard of employing the least radical method to address an illness and above all to do no harm, prisons and jails ought to be using the least radical method to maintain order and protect the safety of inmates and staff. Security methods ought not to become a form of torture with lasting physical or mental health damage. There is well documented evidence of the negative effects of isolation, light deprivation or constant light, and long-term denial of any form of mental stimulation. An especially high risk exists for lasting damage to the significant number, who enter prison already suffering with some form of mental illness.

I have personally witnessed the deterioration of individuals held under these conditions. The image of one inmate sitting on the floor of a dank, dark cell, whose walls were covered with the splattered blood of mice remains with me today. Without any form of mental stimulation, he had caught and smashed them simply to relieve the intolerable boredom he was experiencing. I came to feel I was violating my own Unitarian Universalist belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every individual by participating in these situations.

This legislation provides badly needed guidance for oversight, due process, and use of the least restrictive methods necessary for the safety of the prison itself and for the individuals involved.

Please vote ought to pass on LD 696.