
Final Project: Student Examples

Below are several examples of students' final letters to Maine Governor Janet Mills about Long Creek.

LETTERS FOR LONG CREEK | A Local Justice Project

What should be done about the Long Creek Youth Development Center?

TASK: Using your research guide and your work from this unit, decide what you think should be done about the Long Creek Youth Development Center and **write a letter to a lawmaker** arguing your point.

Dear Governor Mills,

I wish to bring to the forefront of your mind the recent controversy of the Long Creek Youth Development Center. Due to several reports of poor conditions, I believe that Long Creek should be closed and replaced with mental health care centers, among other solutions.

Starting out, there are several reports of poor conditions. For example, in the Ali vs. Long Creek case found in the ACLU¹, guards beat an 11-year-old for no apparent reason, knocking out his front teeth, and did not take him to the dentist for six days afterward, by which time the damage was irreparable. Another case stated that Long Creek is understaffed and unequipped to handle the mental healthcare needs of residents there².

Another consideration is the staff. As of 2016 with a report from the

¹ <https://www.aclumaine.org/en/cases/ali-v-long-creek-et-al>

² https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1033&context=doc_docs

board of visitors³, the staff end up having to do things they are not trained for. Also from this report, staff have been reported to have to observe residents who have made threats or attempts to end their lives, often “experiencing the secondary trauma associated with such a high level of crisis.” The text goes on to state that the staff watch these children at unsustainable rates. And these aren’t the staff that haven’t left the system, or been reported abusing the residents, excessive force or otherwise.

However, I understand that I haven’t made much of an argument that Long Creek should be closed, only that the conditions are poor. Long Creek can always be reformed. Long Creek is flawed in that it is a prison, and prisons are a system of punishment by definition. Incarceration has been a formal punishment since Roman times. But kids have reasons for committing crimes. They might be forced by circumstance to steal when money dries up, or they may have a mental illness. These children need therapy and societal change, not cages in this place that literally can’t help them.

So, if Long Creek is to be closed, it will need an alternative. Therefore, I will propose one here. If a child is found guilty of a crime and they are deemed to have a mental illness aiding to the cause of the crime, then they will be sent to a county mental health center, dedicated to aiding the child, and will treat such illnesses, while also providing therapy to such children that need it. Those whose crimes were not related to mental illness but whose position required such crime, they would need help from the government in their jurisdiction. Those who do not fit into the above

³ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3476220-Report-LCYDC-2016.html>

categories and commit violent crimes would receive a period of probation, during which time their location would be tracked, and they would have a limiting curfew to which breaking results in a fine, etc. Those who continue to commit crimes after punishment would then, and only then, go to a local detention center, smaller than Long Creek, and in the local area so the child stays relatively close to their hometown.

In conclusion, Long Creek should be closed due to several reports of poor conditions, poorly trained and ill equipped staff, and the nature of prisons themselves. Once it closes down, I propose an alternative system based on solving crime at its root instead of punishing the effects of said root.

Sincerely, AG

Letter #2

Dear Governor Mills,

I'm writing to you to make a statement, but even more than that, change the lives of the children at Long Creek. The juvenile detention center has been understaffed over the recent years and is losing the quality it barely had to begin with. That's why I propose we shut down Long Creek and instead focus on the societal problems that go into why children commit crimes, like living in impoverished areas.

The reason I believe that Long Creek is losing its purpose is because of the recent reviews given to the public on the inability for Long Creek to meet children's mental health needs. In a review conducted by the Center for Children's Law and Policy, they call Long Creek "chronically understaffed and ill-equipped to handle the serious mental health needs of young residents who often are placed there because there is nowhere else for them to go."

Another reason I believe Long Creek should be shut down is the brutality toward the residents staying in Long Creek. For example, an 11 year old boy was beaten by guards at Long Creek. The resulting attack broke off multiple teeth of his, but he did not receive medical aid until six days later, when the teeth were already long gone.

My final reason on why I believe Long Creek should be shut down is the lack of staff in the juvenile detention center. Multiple reports have come out criticizing the site for the poor management of staff and the boredom of said staff in recent years. DOC Commissioner Randal, they report "It's challenging to get mental health workers, clinicians, [and] professionals to work in corrections,".

But someone of your status might argue that Long Creek fulfills its purpose of keeping children off of the streets. But the science shows that children that go to Long Creek and experience abuse are more likely to commit a crime after they leave.

With the evidence I have shown, I feel as if Long Creek should be shut down for good and use the funding for it to solve the societal and economic problems that go into children committing crimes.

Thank you for reading.

Sincerely,
MA

Letter #3

Dear Governor Mills,

The purpose of my letter to you is likely unsurprising. Very recently, you vetoed a bill sent to your desk by a narrow majority, one that would have mandated the closing of the Long Creek Youth Development Center. In order to justify your actions, you said that simply closing the facility was “ a simplistic solution to a complex problem,” and I agree. However, this does not mean we should completely shut down all thoughts of change. I think it is still necessary to reform Long Creek while alternatives are being created, by addressing its issues with staff, making it more humane, and creating an environment that prioritizes rehabilitation over punishment.

The staff at Long Creek should be our obvious start. Following the suicide of Charles Maise Knowles, the defendants in a civil lawsuit claimed that they could not be held responsible for his death because they had qualified immunity. This sets up a dangerous precedent where the staff do not have much motivation when it comes to ensuring the safety and security of those in their care. It also reduces the amount of punishment they can receive when they do wrong. However, the staff are not cartoon villains. They also need help. A report launched also following this death found that “staff are charged with supervising a group of over 20 youth at any one time, it is difficult to devote the time and energy needed to dive deeply enough into an individual youth’s

needs to effect long-term change.” It is so understaffed that the roughly 170 workers all have 5,454 hours of overtime put together, and it is often those with the least experience working the longest hours. The answer to this is not more funding, but rather smarter. In 2016, it cost the state 15.28 million dollars to run Long Creek, according to Open Checkbook, and most of that money went to salaries and benefits. Although important that we reward the hard-working staff, Long Creek does not solely exist to put checks in people’s bank accounts. Some of the money should go to training programs that equip them to properly deal with the youths in their care. Right now, they receive the same training as corrections officers in adult jails. This should not be. Adults are, or at least should be, much more responsible than children, and their moral code much more defined. The overtime list should be on a seniority basis. Those who have more experience should work the longest. A more tight-knit bond between care-taker and student should be formed, and such would be encouraged if one person was responsible for fewer people. Long Creek houses youths from all 16 counties, but not only those who are incarcerated. It also houses detainees who are still facing trial and sentencing. This burgeons the system and punishes people before they are convicted of their crime. Instead, Long Creek should only be for those who have been convicted and sentenced.

A report in 2017 found the situation so dire that the children have to go as far as trying to kill or hurt themselves just to get attention. “Incidents involving fights, assaults, suicidal behaviors or self-harm occur on average about twice a day at the facility.” Once two guards, in a use of excessive force, knocked out the front teeth of an 11-year-old, and, according to his mother, bashed his face into a metal bed frame and refused to give him dental care

after. The children are subjected to strip searches, there are cameras in or pointing at the toilets, and LGBTQ+ children are often humiliated by staff. The children are not receiving the education they should be, and 85 percent of those incarcerated in 2017 were previously in special education. Outside of the educational curriculum, they also do not receive the recreational things they should be receiving. Many of the children said they were bored or frustrated. All this and more is what's wrong with Long Creek. When presented with all this evidence, it's hard to believe that the state is actually working for the good of these children when they send them to the facility, and if the children aren't being helped, then the state is blowing cash and getting little in return. First, no child should have to commit self harm for attention. This reflects negatively on the care. They should be able to talk to teachers over the things bothering them without needing to take such drastic, desperate measures. If the staff isn't able to deal with their emotional and physical needs, a separate section should be created specifically for this, like counselors at schools. Secondly, guards should never get physical with a student in a manner that results in physical damage. If such occurs, the guard should be punished, and fired if they refuse to give medical care to a person who needs it. Children should not be made to strip, and while there can be cameras in hallways, rooms, public gathering spaces, there shouldn't be anything in or facing toilets. Any example of discriminatory treatment, based on race, gender, religion, gender, sexual identity or expression, should be punished. This isn't just demeaning to a child, it infringes on their constitutional rights, and if corporate America can be sued and punished for doing such, there is no reason why correction centers should go scot-free. The last issue is the easiest to fix and the fact that

it's even a problem shows how little thought and care is put into this. There are more ways to occupy a child beyond electronic devices and books. There are about a dozen sports involving a simple ball, and all of them release stress, encourage brain activity, and relaxes participants. This is, of course, just the bare minimum, and all these children deserve.

It's obvious that the students do not feel safe in the detention center, and this should not be. If it serves to facilitate rehabilitation, then the environment should be conducive to this. Years of precedent have hardened our minds to believe that our incarceration system must be as punitive as possible, dehumanizing the people within it, and encouraging rather than deterring crime. While you might, at first, think that abolitionists such as Angela Davis are those propagating "simple solutions to complex problems," most of the alternatives they present could be implemented even in Long Creek. Rather than having the students sit in a detention center and do practically nothing, they could pay back the community through community service. They could plan beautification programs like murals and street art, they could clean up our parks, work in schools or soup kitchens, help the homeless, set up donations. This way they are learning and the community is benefitting. Like with Finland's open prisons, they could have access to jobs or education. Those old enough can be assisted in getting, maybe, a job in McDonalds or at a clothing store, or they could be enrolled in community college or do online courses. We must remember that these are people, and furthermore, children, not animals, and that they should be thought of as complex, emotional beings. But if, even after all this, the child is still resistant to betterment, then one should assume that the problem goes beyond the

physical. This is why mental health practitioners, social workers, and teachers are needed. People like these are best equipped to help children whose circumstance has hardened.

I doubt that anyone is asking for Long Creek to forever remain as it is, but there is a growing number of the populus wondering why we do not just close it all down. While the data and information coming out of all the reports is very heartbreaking, we need to objectively consider all our actions. Long Creek is the last detention center, holding youths from all the counties. If it were to be shut down immediately, what would happen to them? Where would they go? Most of these youths do not have stable homes just waiting to take them in, and turning them into homeless shelters won't fix the problem either. The system is likely incapable of holding such a large and sudden influx all at once. These reforms are temporary. It is still my belief that Long Creek should be closed down, if not only for the symbolic act of doing away with the violence it has harbored and for setting a precedent for any other states in such a dilemma. They should only be in place while adequate alternatives are being set up.

In conclusion, all the myriad problems discussed in this essay are more than enough proof that reforms are needed, and all of them show that it will not be an easy task, but I believe that the citizens of Maine have the diligence and tenacity to see such a project through. I know we can make sure our children are educated, that they have access to jobs and mental health help. We can hold adults accountable, we can help preserve their dignity by stopping strip searches, violent attacks, and intruding cameras. Then, when all that is said and done, we can sit and discuss alternatives to move our society away

from a punitive system that does more hurt than help to its most vulnerable and towards a fair, rehabilitative system where children learn from their mistakes and are reintegrated into society in a way that does minimal or, most ideally, no harm to either party. This change will happen eventually. Humans have a tendency to want to fix things, and Long Creek is the product of a system in desperate need of fixing. Your help would be appreciated but it is not mandatory. I invite you to join the movement and more quickly move our society in the right direction. Thank you for reading to the end.

Yours Truly,

EA