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DOC Commissioner Responds to tragic event at the Long Creek Youth Development Center

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Letter to the Editor – From DOC Commissioner, Dr. Joseph Fitzpatrick

The devastating loss the Knowles family is experiencing is a tragedy. My heart goes out to the Knowles family, the staff members and young residents of the Long Creek Youth Development Center, as well as those within the greater community who are feeling this loss on a very personal level.

It is heart wrenching to remain silent; however, as the Commissioner of the Maine Department of Corrections, I am legally bound to refrain from comments about an on-going investigation.

As a clinical psychologist with a 25-year history of advocating for children and families, I certainly understand the critical role of ongoing emotional support following such a tragic loss of a young life. In the past 20 years, the Maine Department of Corrections has not experienced the death of one of our young residents until now. Our staff at Long Creek has and will continue to provide a safe space for all the young residents of Long Creek. We will provide ongoing emotional support and treatment to the residents of Long Creek as they experience their personal struggles around this tragic event.

On a daily basis the dedicated men and women working at Long Creek try to support and strengthen the lives of the young people in their charge. The staff members too are struggling with this tragedy. I want them to know that we wholeheartedly support and appreciate their ongoing dedication to their work with the young residents of Long Creek.

As the Commissioner of the Maine Department of Corrections, I have an open-door policy of transparency related to the development and oversight of our policies and protocols. We routinely collaborate with outside agencies and experts such as American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, Disability Rights Center of Maine, National Alliance on Mental Illness of Maine, as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons in the development of our policies, practices and training. As a part of standard operating procedure, we are regularly audited and reviewed by the American Correctional Association and the National Organization of Performance Based Standards. These ongoing reviews ensure we uphold the highest level of daily operations and treatment programming.

However, even with all the aforementioned oversight and safeguards, we are struggling with the tragic loss of one of our residents. So we are diligently reviewing all of our current policies and protocols, which will include an analysis by state and federal experts in the areas of suicide prevention and transgender policies and programming.

Our medical and mental health clinicians at Long Creek are highly regarded in the State of Maine and on a national level. Long Creek utilizes board-certified psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and clinical social workers in the assessment and treatment of the detained and committed residents. There is also a fully

staffed medical department at Long Creek with 24 hours per day on-site medical care. These experienced professionals have specialties in areas such as clinical assessment and treatment, gender responsiveness, transgender and gender identity, among many other areas. They have and will continue to provide comprehensive treatment services to every young person at Long Creek, detained or committed.

In closing, I would just like to state that this tragic loss of life has been devastating for all involved and our hearts and prayers are with the Knowles family during their time of sorrow.

Respectfully,

Dr. Joseph Fitzpatrick

Commissioner, Department of Corrections