

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide supportive comments on SB 474 and for your attention to public defense in Oregon.

My name is Chris Henegan and I am a third year law student at Willamette University, and Director of the Willamette chapter of the student organization Oregon Criminal Defense Law Student Association (OCDLSA). With a chapter at each of Oregon's law schools, OCDLSA has the primary mission of promoting criminal defense practice among students, and assisting students with opportunities to explore the field of criminal defense. The Willamette chapter is composed of 122 members representing students from the 1L, 2L, 3L classes, as well as some students who graduated as recently as 2024. This letter in support is being submitted on behalf of the students of Willamette OCDLSA.

For a school as small as Willamette, 122 members is a substantial number of students. We have students in our organization who are interested in the protection of constitutional rights; students who are interested in government accountability; students who are interested in supporting vulnerable and marginalized groups within our community; and students who are interested in some or everything in between. The interest for criminal defense among law students at Willamette University is alive and well. And yet, you may be surprised to learn that outside of a couple core classes offered through the law curriculum, there are few substantive opportunities available for students to explore that interest. I've personally experienced the difficulty of getting into the criminal defense field as a student, and it's an experience shared by numerous members of our OCDLSA chapter. Other than taking the basic Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure classes that are offered, students who are interested in pursuing criminal defense are mostly limited to outside clerkships with local firms and organizations. Unfortunately, the number of available law clerk positions available at any given time are significantly fewer than the number of students interested in criminal defense. The opening of Willamette's criminal defense clinic this past year has bridged that gap. We now have the opportunity for numerous students to get the experience and training they likely would have been without otherwise. It's an opportunity I wish I had as a second year law student; but it's an opportunity that I'm thankful exists now for my fellow students.

As I'm sure the committee is aware, we are still in the depths of an ongoing public defender crisis. Digging our way out of this hole starts here, at law school. By ensuring students have the opportunity to learn and experience the practice of criminal defense, we are building a defense bar that will ensure the needs of Oregonians are met into the future. I urge the committee to support continued funding for the law school public defense clinics through SB 474.

Sincerely,

Chris Henegan, J.D. expected 2025
Director, Oregon Criminal Defense Law Student Association, Willamette Chapter