

Re: Testimony in Favor, SB 474

February 4, 2025

Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

I write on behalf of Willamette University College of Law to strongly support SB 474, which would establish a Criminal Defense Clinical Legal Education Program within the Higher Education Coordinating Commission, and continue funding for criminal defense clinics at the law schools of our State. In just 6 months, our criminal defense clinic has already demonstrated great value for our students and for the State, and it promises to play a substantial part in helping to alleviate the public defense crisis in years to come. I offer below some specific observations about the value of the program to Willamette - observations that I think are applicable to each of the schools, though each school takes a slightly different approach:

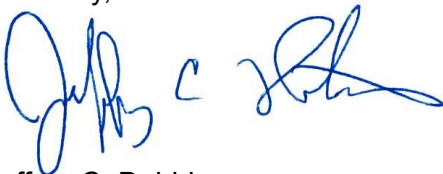
- **State-funded Criminal Defense Clinics are already making a difference:** This is true for students, for defendants who would otherwise be unrepresented, and for the future of criminal defense in the State of Oregon. With just 6 months into our new clinic (we started the second semester in January), Willamette's clinic has enrolled a total of 16 students, with 4 more getting advanced training this semester, and more training anticipated this coming summer. These students will help represent 80-100 otherwise unrepresented defendants, with some increase in capacity as we move beyond the startup phase of the clinic. And - in ways not possible without the clinic - these students will graduate this May feeling better prepared professionally and personally for a career in criminal defense, which we anticipate will expand the capacity of the state's criminal defense system in future years.
- **Practical training in criminal defense prepares graduates to enter *and stay* in practice after graduation.** At Willamette Law, we work to make our students practice-ready at graduation. This improves their value to employers, improves job satisfaction, and helps to make them important and productive contributors to the legal community from day one. The hands-on learning provided by the new Criminal Defense Clinic helps to ease enrolled students' transition to practice, preparing them to make an immediate positive impact in the criminal defense community - and hopefully making a decision to stay in that community easier. Through guided training in essential aspects of public defense, such as interviewing clients, appearing in court, and reviewing and developing discovery materials, our students are able to deepen their understanding of public defense while gaining confidence and competence. By equipping students with the tools to advocate effectively for defendants upon graduation, the clinic helps bridge the gap to justice for those most in need.

- **State support is the key to making this opportunity available for future criminal defense practitioners.** While public defense is a continually growing area of interest among our students, law schools like Willamette have to make decisions about how to prioritize limited student dollars in order to staff any new courses or programs. Having a full time criminal defense instructor helps to ensure stability, provide continuity for students, and build interest over time; wraparound services and support staff for the clinic help to provide students with the expertise they need to transition into practice and expands the capacity of those that we do hire to help. Without the state's support for the criminal defense clinic, we could not offer it. The state's support is essential to sustain and expand the opportunity for hands-on training of these future defenders.
- **Criminal Defense Clinic funding supports collaborative work among Oregon's law schools to help solve the criminal defense crisis at a larger level.** In addition to the clinic's significance at Willamette Law, the state funding has provided a model for collaboration among Oregon's three law schools in seeking to help address the state's public defense crisis. Each school has taken a unique approach to creating a program that works for their students, and the variety of approaches fosters an exchange of ideas and strategies that strengthen both legal education and public defense efforts statewide while developing strategies to coordinate our programs, leverage resources and ideas, and generate efficiencies associated with the work. U of O's Portland area clinic, for example, has made space available for students from the other schools where their programs have hit maximum capacity, thereby improving efficiency and maximizing productivity. The schools have also talked about how to expand the clinics' support to more rural areas, which face their own specific access to justice problems in the criminal defense space. The collaboration amongst law schools, and the overall work of the program, also helps attract future law students from outside Oregon to our state by showcasing the state's commitment to innovative, hands-on legal education - making Oregon a great place to study and practice public defense.

While the full positive effects of this clinic will unfold over time, continued state support is essential in sustaining and expanding the program at Willamette Law and the other schools. We are grateful to the state for its support of this opportunity so far, and view continued funding of the clinics as critical to addressing the public defense crisis today and in the future.

I would be pleased to answer any questions the Committee might have.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey C. Dobbins
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Willamette University College of Law