



TO: Senate Committee on Judiciary

FR: Public Defenders of Oregon

RE: Support for SB 474 - Criminal Defense Clinical Legal Education State Program

DA: February 4, 2025

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

On behalf of Public Defenders of Oregon, the statewide association of nonprofit public defense offices, we write to express our strong support for SB 474. This critical legislation provides \$3.6 million in funding to Lewis & Clark, University of Oregon, and Willamette law schools to enhance their structured training programs for court-certified law students handling misdemeanor cases under supervision. Our offices train nearly all new public defenders in Oregon, and have seen first hand how hands-on experience in a student's legal education can set them up to be effective and dedicated public defenders.

Oregon's public defense system is facing an urgent crisis due to severe attorney shortages. Law school misdemeanor clinics have already demonstrated their effectiveness in addressing this crisis by producing well-trained, practice-ready attorneys who help alleviate strain on public defense offices statewide. The need for continued and expanded support for these clinics is clear, and SB 474 is a vital step toward securing a sustainable and well-trained public defense workforce.

The impact of these clinics is evident:

- Law school clinics are exceeding expectations, handling nearly 450 cases this academic year alone, reducing the burden on public defense offices.
- Certified law students manage misdemeanor cases under supervision, allowing public defenders to focus on higher-priority cases.
- Clinics provide a direct pipeline for future public defenders, with multiple students receiving job offers before even graduating law school.

Looking ahead, the benefits of this program extend far beyond the immediate relief it provides. Even public defense offices not currently partnered with a clinic stand to gain from the increasing number of well-trained public defenders entering the workforce. Strong educational pipelines are essential to resolving Oregon's public defense crisis, and continued investment in law school clinics will help ensure that we have a dedicated, capable, and sustainable public defense workforce for years to come.

We urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to support SB 474 and invest in the future of public defense in Oregon. Thank you for your time and consideration.