

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 Michael Helock and I am a practicing attorney at Public Defender Services of Lane County. For one full academic year (fall 2018 and spring 2019), I participated in the Criminal Defense Clinic at University of Oregon School of Law to gain real-world experience representing clients and to prepare for a career in public defense.

During my time in the clinic, I had the opportunity to represent clients for the first time in my legal career. While I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, I held several internships in the field but those positions were all very limited in scope. My participation in the defense clinic was well-rounded, inspiring, and ultimately introduced me to all of the aspects of criminal defense that I had never been responsible for in any of my previous positions. In my view, what makes the clinic so effective for aspiring attorneys is the educational aspect in addition to the practical experience. Not only did we spend a lot of time learning local practices, learning relevant case law, and brainstorming cases/doing practices exercises, but we got to put that to work in the field before even graduating law school.

My experience in the clinic came at a time of uncertainty in the future of my legal career. I went to law school specifically to be a public defender. But when I started to join other clubs and get exposed to other areas of law, I had a few moments spent doubting my future in public defense. My local PD office did not have the capacity to hire me as a clerk, and I started to consider shifting my focus to another field. This is when I was informed about the clinic and signed up immediately. After just a few months spent in the office and the courtroom, I felt confident in my ability to handle lower-level misdemeanor cases from start to finish.

The relationships I developed and the skills I got to put into practice for the first time had me more excited than ever to come back to the field when I became a licensed attorney. I spent a year after law school as a judicial clerk before going back to the Lane County Public Defender's office, but when I did return, I had a certain level of confidence to jump in and start taking cases. Thanks to my time in the clinic, I was eager to take on more cases from the beginning and I worked responsibly with my supervisor to take on cases at a slightly accelerated rate than the office typically started new fresh-out-of-law school attorneys. I felt confident to do so and I can only attribute that to the clinic experience.

I've historically struggled with transitions throughout my educational and professional career. Starting a new position in any field can be terrifying. Especially so for a new legal career. Public Defense is unique in the sense that we not only have to master the law, but we have to understand the social dynamics at issue in order to best represent our clients. There are so many factors that vary between cases and clients and having been exposed to

these while in law school helps the transition to being lead attorney on a case tremendously.

The criminal defense clinic was my only opportunity to do this kind of work while in law school. It was the most invigorating experience that had me coming back for more. I spent every bit of free time at the office looking for tasks and ways to get involved in cases. I networked and saw what it was like to do this work. Rather than scare me away, it pulled me in. I honestly believe that my experience in the clinic helped me establish the local roots I needed to stay in this state after graduating law school (my family lives on the east coast).

Not only did it help me establish roots, but it helped me flourish rather quickly. As previously mentioned, I worked up to a nearly full misdemeanor caseload much faster than anticipated, and I felt adequately prepared to do so. I then had the opportunity to move up again to lesser felony cases with supervision sooner than anticipated, and I am so grateful for the progression my office has afforded me.

I urge the committee to support continued funding for the law school public defense clinics through SB 474. By doing so, the legislature will ensure that more students receive the training they need to serve as public defenders, addressing a critical shortage of qualified attorneys and strengthening Oregon's justice system.

Sincerely,

Michael Helock

Attorney at Public Defender Services of Lane County, Inc.