

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 Jordy Bridges-Thomas and I am a current student in the Willamette University College of Law Criminal Defense Clinic as well as a law clerk for the Public Defenders of Marion County. I participated in this clinic to gain real-world experience representing clients and to prepare for a career in public defense.

Through this clinic I have worked on multiple cases from start to finish. I have seen my clients begin the process of completing their post-conviction obligations, and know with confidence they are able to complete those requirements because of the work I did to provide thorough and competent representation.

Being a part of the Criminal Defense Clinic has aided me by gaining critical courtroom experience that has prepared me to step into public defense roles immediately after graduation. Whether it be through advocacy of my client's experiences and personal qualities, expanding the limits of what the court can do for our client's needs, or bolstering my public speaking skills in court, all of it is possible only through the work the Clinic allowed me to do.

Through the clinic, I have been able to directly contribute to addressing Oregon's public defense crisis by handling real misdemeanor cases under the supervision of a qualified attorney. A recent study informed us the number of civil compromises that happen in the state of Oregon estimates between 100-200. Our Clinic alone contributed to 5% of that estimate, helping to resolve conflicts that need not be drawn out and litigated over.

By the time I graduate, I will be ready to manage misdemeanor cases and be well on my way to handling lesser felonies, which will significantly reduce my early career learning curve, as well as putting me in the best position possible to take on the Supervised Practice Portfolio Examination to obtain licensure. Beyond legal skills, my supervising attorney has taught me the corner stones of client communication, time management, and case law research.

Working closely with experienced attorneys at the the Public Defenders of Marion County has given me invaluable insights into the realities of public defense and practical skills for client advocacy. I have seen the reality of client representation and that image of fighting for my clients and protecting their interest has been burned into my heart as a reason to keep on fighting for legal justice being balanced against state interests. These clinics are crucial in creating a new generation of ready-to-serve public defenders, addressing a statewide crisis and ensuring new lawyers like me can immediately contribute to the system.

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,
Jordy L. Bridges-Thomas