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RE: Support for Senate Bill 474

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 Sandra Stewart, and I am a current student in the Willamette Law Criminal Defense Clinic. While I am still early in my clinic experience, I am eager to gain the practical skills and hands-on training necessary to become an effective advocate for future clients. Opportunities like this clinic are critical for aspiring public defenders, as they provide law students with real-world experience that cannot be replicated in a classroom setting.

As a first-generation law student, I deeply appreciate the opportunity to learn the intricacies of the legal system in a structured, supportive environment. Navigating law school without prior exposure to the profession presents unique challenges, and clinics like this one provide critical mentorship and guidance. The ability to work under the supervision of experienced attorneys and professors allows me to develop the skills necessary for competent advocacy while ensuring that I understand not just the theory of the law, but also the practical realities of practicing it.

A criminal defense legal clinic is more than just an educational program—it is a vital training ground where students develop essential advocacy skills, such as legal research, client interviewing, motion drafting, and courtroom argumentation. These experiences prepare us to handle the high-stakes nature of criminal defense work and ensure that we are ready to provide competent and zealous representation from day one of our legal careers. Without clinics like these, many law students would graduate without ever having interacted with real clients, negotiated with prosecutors, or drafted motions under real-world constraints.

Additionally, the close supervision of experienced faculty members in the clinic setting and collaboration with student colleagues provides an unparalleled learning environment. Professors not only ensure that we are developing strong legal skills, but they also instill the ethical and strategic decision-making necessary for effective advocacy. Their guidance allows us to learn from our mistakes, ask critical questions, and gain confidence in our abilities before we enter practice.

Although I am still in the early stages of my clinic experience, I know that the skills I will develop through this program will be invaluable in my future career. By supporting SB 474, you are ensuring that law students—especially those of us who do not have a built-in network of legal professionals to guide us—have the opportunity to receive this essential training. This will lead to a stronger, more prepared public defense workforce and ultimately enhance access to justice for indigent clients.

I urge you to support this bill and recognize the crucial role that criminal defense clinics play in shaping the next generation of public defenders. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sandra Stewart

Willamette University College of Law

Criminal Defense Clinic