

Good afternoon members of the committee,

My name is Keelin Sweeney, I'm currently a first year at the University of Maine Law School, and I am submitting this written testimony on behalf of myself and as an elected representative of Students for the Sixth Amendment—a student organization that is filled with passionate and determined future community leaders.

At 22 years old I have only ever called one place home, Maine. I've pursued higher education in both my undergraduate and now my graduate studies here, with the overarching goal of giving back to the community that raised me. However, with our State facing constitutional crisis and impending collapse I may be faced with the decision of having to leave the place I've grown up in to pursue the legal career of my choosing.

Our current legal infrastructure surrounding criminal indigent defense in this State is undeniably a violation of the rights vested to us through the Federal Constitution. Over a hundred people in our justice system are awaiting legal representation in some of the most critical parts of their cases, and there is only so much "charity" that the limited number of private sector attorneys can offer to these individuals without proper representation.

Our lack of representation in indigent criminal cases is a consequence of our lack of infrastructure. This not a reflection of a lack of interest in this profession, because there are passionate and willing advocates who have a deep desire to do this line of work. It boils down to the fact that there are simply not enough opportunities to pursue this niche within the jurisdiction of Maine law.

Those who are passionate about criminal defense in this State, like me and many of my peers, are faced with the choice of joining a private defense firm or opening their own firm, the latter of which is untenable as a new lawyer. For those who are uninterested in either option, they are ultimately forced to go elsewhere to pursue their passion. In essence, the lack of opportunities and resources in this State has resulted in its unattractiveness to prospective lawyers pursuing a legal career both in and out of the State.

We are on the brink of collapse. The question is no longer how can we fix this issue, but why has it taken us this long to resolve. I wholeheartedly believe that LD2219 is a critical and pertinent step in getting Maine's legal indigent system where it needs to be in 2024.