

*Tristan Dewdney  
Windham, Maine*

Good afternoon. My name is Tristan Dewdney. Maine is currently experiencing a constitutional crisis because there are simply not enough lawyers in the state available to take court-appointed cases to represent indigent defendants. I am a second-year law student at Maine Law, and I want to do this kind of legal work when I graduate. I am motivated by the need for such work and by the chance to make a real difference. However, despite the pressing need for lawyers in this field, Maine's system as currently constituted puts up barriers that dissuade law students like me from starting indigent defense careers in the state. Approving all of the funding MCILS asks for in LD2214 would be a big step toward removing those barriers.

The first barrier we currently face is that the dearth of devoted public defender offices in the state means there is a lack of internships or externships for indigent defense, and students like me fall behind in our career preparation compared to others in different specializations.

The second barrier is the lack of job opportunities once we graduate. If we want to do indigent defense work in Maine, we must either get hired into a firm where we are permitted to do a bit of indigent defense on the side of more lucrative work, or we must go it alone and start our own firms from scratch, learning as we go and operating without workplace mentors, support systems or shared resources.

The third barrier is the barrage of assigned cases we can expect to receive as soon as we place ourselves on the MCILS roster. As an inexperienced and under-resourced new defense lawyer, there is currently no way to start taking court-appointed cases other than to be thrown into the deep end before learning to swim.

These barriers are not impossible to overcome, but they create enough friction that some Maine Law students will be pushed toward choosing other specializations, or choosing a different state to practice in. At this point in Maine's constitutional crisis, we cannot afford that.

Instead, if this committee approves all of the requested funding in LD2214, the state can begin to support a direct pipeline for Maine Law students to start indigent defense careers. Expanding the number of Maine public defender offices and the total number of positions available would create more internship/externship opportunities for students, it would provide training, mentorship, and support systems for new defense lawyers, and it would disperse the responsibility of the case backlog so as not to drown those who are just starting out.

We have a number of students at Maine Law right now who want to do this work. Approving MCILS's requested funding would help create a direct, sustainable pipeline that would get them there, and would get future law students there as well. We need this funding to create a robust, sustainable indigent defense system in Maine. Thank you for your time.