

Lily Wilson

Testimony in Support of LD 2059: An Act to Provide Required Funding for the Reimbursement of Assigned Counsel and to Develop the Public Defender Office for Cumberland County

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Good afternoon Chair Carney, Chair Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Lily Wilson and I am a second year Maine Law student, where I'm the chair of Students for the Sixth Amendment, a group dedicated to advocating for the protection of 6th Amendment rights. This past summer, I was also an intern at the Lewiston Public Defender's Office. I'm here in support of LD 2059.

I decided to apply to Maine Law in 2023, while working downstairs in the Senate President's office as MCILS became MCPDS. Watching that process move through the legislature is what catalyzed my choice to apply to Law School. I only applied to Maine Law because I didn't just want to be an attorney, I wanted to be part of building a more sustainable and just indigent defense system here in the state I call home. Since starting law school, that's only become more true.

I'll forgo talk of the moral and ethical imperatives of upholding the 6th Amendment because I know the members of this committee are well aware of those imperatives and act frequently to make them manifest in our judicial system.

What I do want to share is the perspective of a law student considering what her rapidly approaching legal career will look like, especially in light of the fact that all the enthusiasm and commitment in the world won't pay for student loans, insurance, rent, or a mortgage.

I will graduate law school with about \$80,000 of debt from my undergraduate and law school loans combined. It's not a number I say out loud very often but I think about it all the time. A little over \$25,000 comes from undergrad, which I started paying off before starting school back up. The rest comes after a scholarship that covers just over half of my in-state tuition and a part-time restaurant job. For the first two months of school last year, I worked 3-4 evening shifts a week. Eventually, I started frequently getting so sleepy in class that my notes would trail into scribbles on the page. I dropped to just 1 or 2 days and accepted the fact that I needed to take out more loans to cover the gap. I continued to work that job through my internship in Lewiston, where I made about \$16 an hour pre-tax. By itself, that wasn't enough to cover my basic expenses. Generally, I worked 6-7 days a week.

None of this is to say "woe is me." Nor is it to say that mine is a unique experience. Many students hustle to pay for school. Working at the Defender's office and learning from the attorneys there was a privilege. Attending law school is (at least when I zoom

out) a joy. Plus, when I do the math, it's totally doable to pay my debt over a reasonable number of years with a solid legal job that will dependably pay the bills.

What's not doable, however, is having that kind of debt with even the *possibility* of not being compensated in a reliable and predictable way. I am one of many students who sees the chronic underfunding of MCPDS as a material barrier to pursuing work urgently needed in our state. Lack of funding and certainty makes it more challenging to start a job doing indigent work because firms with capacity and infrastructure to train for new attorneys aren't sure what the future holds – this is an issue I've seen impact my peers who have graduated in the last two years. Of course, the public defender's offices offer great opportunities for exposure and training— something I've experienced and that would be bolstered substantially by the growth of the Cumberland office.

Additionally, the tension and animosity that the scarcity of funding creates in the field is one that's been observable to me as a student and intern. Alongside the risk of not being paid, this reality is a heavy counterweight to even the most energetic commitment and optimism. Not to mention when it is because of foreseen and preventable financial shortfalls.

LD 2059 is a crucial step towards supporting the commitment and optimism of students and young attorneys— qualities that are essential to our state's constitutional and humane obligations to defendants. I implore you all to not just support the passage of this bill out of committee, but to fight ardently amongst your colleagues for its funding.

Thank you.