

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 student at Maine Law, where I'm the chair of Students for the Sixth Amendment, a student 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 to ask that you support the passage of LD 2059.

I decided to apply to law school 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 decision to go to Maine Law. It was the only school I applied to because I didn't just want to be an attorney, I wanted to be an attorney who is 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 commitment and idealism in the world won't pay the bills.

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. 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. At the start of my first year, I didn't think people were serious about saying that it was almost impossible to work more than a day or two a week while doing law school full time. For the first two months of school, 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 had to drop to just 1 or 2 days and accept 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 this is a unique experience. Lots of people hustle to pay for law school. And it's worth it. Working at the Defender's office and learning from the skilled attorneys there was a privilege and attending law school is, at least when I zoom out, a joy.

What is a woe, however, is the chronic underfunding of MCPDS creating serious and unnecessary barriers to pursuing indigent defense as a career, especially right out of law school.

The thought of graduating, at a worthwhile but substantial personal and financial cost, to pursue a career where I could just stop getting paid because an entirely predictable funding shortfall came about? That's a tough counterweight even to the most energetic commitment and optimism.

This bill 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 in the judiciary. 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.