

**Before the House Standing Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources**  
**February 12, 2025**  
**HB 2174 Proponent Testimony– Oral, In-Person**

**Anne Marie Yatsula, Private Citizen**

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Good afternoon. My name is Anne Marie Yatsula. I'm a 3<sup>rd</sup> year law student at the University of Kansas School of Law, and I'm here to express my support for this bill.

I grew up in Tampa, Florida, a city that's part of a metro area which, as of the last census, had a larger population than that of the state of Kansas. Based on that fact alone, I'm the most unlikely person to be speaking here today in support of this bill. But my time at KU Law and the experiences I've had during my time as a law student have given me a desire to help our state address the access to justice problems it currently faces.

I was able to get involved with the Kansas Supreme Court's Rural Justice Initiative Committee during my second year of law school. I had attended the Southwest Kansas Bar Association's annual meeting in Dodge City as part of a trip with the law school, and a major theme of the meeting was how to recruit and retain attorneys in rural areas. I assisted the Committee in data gathering for the report by moderating two focus groups of my classmates at KU Law. We discussed the benefits of a rural legal practice, like an ability to immediately get hands-on experience and to work with mentors, but despite those and other benefits, one thing came up time and time again: the financial hardships that can come with rural practice.

According to the data gathered by the Rural Justice Initiative Committee, the average overall salary for Kansas law school graduates was \$73,003 in 2022. In contrast, rural Kansas attorneys graduating after 2021 reported an average salary of \$59,000. That disparity reinforces what I heard from my peers: rural work doesn't pay as well as urban work. And that is a huge concern when someone has student loans to repay. According to student loan survey data from the American Bar Association, around 80% of respondents indicated that student loan debt influences their choice of job or career in some way. Many of my classmates, myself included, are looking at near six-figure total educational debt. It is a more prudent financial choice to take a better-paying job when faced with debt of that scale. But something has to give. Across Kansas, people in rural communities are suffering from a lack of attorneys who are able to assist with legal issues from writing wills to resolving property line disputes. And for criminal defendants, a constitutional crisis is looming as there are fewer attorneys available to represent criminal defendants.

Financial assistance in law school and beyond is crucial to making rural practice a viable, sustainable option. Similar programs for doctors and veterinarians have been in place for decades, and those programs have been effective at helping rural communities recruit and, perhaps more importantly, retain skilled professionals. Financial assistance is part of a much

larger push for change in attorney recruitment and retention in rural Kansas, and the programs in this bill would help to solve one of the key problems: financial burdens.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my testimony on this bill. If you haven't had a chance to read the Rural Justice Initiative Committee's final report, I'd like to encourage you to do so—you may find it useful in your discussion on this bill.

I'm happy to stand for questions at the appropriate time.