



TO: The Honorable Ken Rahjes, Chair
And Members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources

FROM: Kansas Women Attorneys Association
Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Recruitment & Solo and Small Firm Committee

RE: HB 2174—Enacting the attorney training program for rural Kansas act to provide financial assistance to lawyers and law students who practice law in rural areas.

DATE: February 12, 2025

Chairman Rahjes and Members of the Committee,

The Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Recruitment and the Solo and Small Firm Committee of the Kansas Women Attorneys Association, also known as KWAA, provide this testimony in **SUPPORT** of HB 2174: Enacting the attorney training program for rural Kansas act to provide financial assistance to lawyers and law students who practice law in rural areas.

KWAA is a statewide bar association that was created in 1994 to provide information to women attorneys seeking increased bar involvement, judicial positions, and professional development. While one of its purposes is to encourage the advancement and support of women in the legal profession, membership is open to all attorneys in Kansas and we do have male members. Our purposes also include promoting efficient administration of justice and promoting equality and social justice for all people. Several of our members served on the Kansas Supreme Court's Rural Justice Initiative Committee (RJIC) and gave valuable input that shaped its recommendations.

Our members believe all Kansans deserve access to quality legal representation, regardless of where they choose to live. Many of our members live and/or practice in rural Kansas and have firsthand knowledge of the extent and effect of the rural attorney shortage. It is a matter of simple supply and demand: the demand for legal services in rural areas is very high, yet the supply of attorneys available to provide those services is very low and consistently getting lower. This affects the entire Kansas bar by increasing attorney caseloads. We have also seen a great increase in the number of pro se litigants over the years, as parties have no choice but to represent themselves: there are simply no attorneys available to hire, or they can't afford one. This hinders the efficient administration of justice in rural Kansas.

In 2023, KWAA formed the Ad Hoc Committee on Rural Recruitment to develop and recruit rural attorneys. We made a strategic plan to "plant the seed" by visiting K-12 classrooms to encourage students to think about legal careers and developed materials to assist educators with lesson plans and presentations about careers in the law. Many of our members have presented in classrooms and

at career fairs across the state to educate students about the justice system and about how to become an attorney. We also encourage students to consider careers as court reporters, paralegals, court services officers, and other legal professions in which there are shortages. Other projects we have in the works include partnering with Washburn Law, FHSU, and Pittsburg State University for a “Legal Minds Academy,” and collaborating with the Kansas First Amendment Foundation on a constitutional lecture series for rural high school students.

But if these students do go to law school, how do we get them to come to rural communities to live and work as lawyers? In our classroom and career fair visits, a question we frequently face from students is: What about the cost? Even if students are interested in a career in law, the prospect of six-figure student loan debt and decades of repayment scares them away. Similarly, there has been ample discussion amongst our membership over the years about how high levels of student loan debt have prevented members from considering practice in a rural area. Some have been fortunate to take advantage of Public Service Loan Forgiveness, but there are limited legal public service jobs available, and it does not apply to attorneys in private practice. Thus, it does not help increase the number of attorneys who can be hired by people living in rural areas to handle their legal matters. Other repayment programs, such as Rural Opportunity Zones, are certainly helpful but unfortunately do not scratch the surface of most law student loan debt balances.

In addition to the many types of matters for which people consult attorneys, private practice attorneys in rural areas are essential for criminal matters. The public defender system in Kansas is not big enough to provide legal defense in the many criminal cases in which defendants are constitutionally entitled to legal counsel, and our private practice attorneys take those appointments and fulfill those duties. They also are appointed in child in need of care, civil commitment, and parental rights termination and adoption cases.

These private practitioners, often solo, have all the overhead costs and none of the benefits of large law firms. The costs of health insurance, professional liability insurance, business owners’ insurance, etc. often discourage attorneys from striking out on their own in small towns. Because we need attorneys to serve on opposing sides without professional conflicts of interest, we frequently see solo practices, and so the overhead isn’t shared as it would be in a law firm and training and mentoring relationships are not ready-made.

If the programs outlined in HB 2174 are implemented, KWAA and its members are committed to provide ongoing practice area and mentorship support for the attorneys who take advantage of them, to help increase the likelihood they will remain in rural communities long-term. Attorneys in rural areas can experience isolation, and our KWAA members are available to consult and collaborate with these attorneys and to provide professional and personal advice.

We strongly believe HB 2174 would make practicing law in rural areas immensely more attractive and affordable for new attorneys, which would in turn promote the efficient administration of justice in Kansas and equality and social justice for all Kansans, regardless of where they live. We fully support passage of this bill.