

Testimony in Support of HB 2174.

House Committee on Agriculture and National Resources

February 12, 2025

Marilyn Harp, Citizen Lobbyist

Chairman Rahjes and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this bill and your interest in this topic in general.

This bill presents an opportunity for the State of Kansas to invest in meeting the legal needs of rural Kansans.

I served as a member of the Supreme Court Rural Justice Initiative, which studied this issue for many months. My membership on that working group was based, primarily, on my prior position as Executive Director of Kansas Legal Services. I have worked for 15 years to recruit and hire attorneys in many rural parts of Kansas, including Salina, Hays Pittsburg and Dodge City, as well as urban areas.

I come to you to document that hiring attorneys for those areas is very difficult, even when the person is being offered a firm salary. Those we recruit don't have to obtain fee paying clients to pay themselves. They are supported by a staff already in place and an extended support group of attorney colleagues across the state. These positions are advertised and law students are recruited for them. Even with all those things which would encourage the recruitment of attorneys to rural areas, it was extremely difficult to hire people in those places. Positions remained open for many graduation cycles, as we attempt Fall and Spring to hire new graduates and bring them to rural Kansas. In fact, KLS has had a vacant attorney position in Dodge City for more than 5 years.

When Kansas Legal Services cannot fill a rural attorney position, it means that civil legal services aren't available to low income families and seniors in that portion of the state. Remote access is a poor option. Being connected to the community through physical presence makes the legal services provided of a higher quality. Without an attorney physically present in the area means that no attorney can go to court with the client and no attorneys are available to go to senior centers or meet with clients to sign legal documents in person.

Lawyers are as fundamental to meeting the needs of rural community members as doctors. The state should invest in meeting those legal needs of their communities in the same manner that medical providers are encouraged through supporting their student tuition and related expenses.

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