
Proponent Testimony for House Bill No. 2223
House Committee on Health and Human Services
Wednesday, March 12, 2025
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Chair Carpenter and Members of the Committee I want to thank you for this opportunity provide testimony in support of HB 2223 on behalf of the state's largest Community Health Center serving more than 80,000 Kansans in the most economically challenged and least healthy region of our state. Our patients disproportionately represent the working poor, the uninsured and those covered by Medicaid and the Health Insurance Marketplace; a growing number are covered by Medicare in our region with almost 20% now over the age of 65. We provide comprehensive medical, dental, behavioral health and support services including transportation regardless of ability to pay. Our goal is to deliver high quality care that is both affordable and accessible.

As many of you are aware, access to healthcare in rural Kansas has been on the decline for decades. All of the eleven counties we serve are health professional shortage areas leaving many with limited access to primary care let alone specialty care. Pittsburg – the population center of the region – has seen our supply of specialists erode over the last 20 years with no hope of replacement.

One of the most basic gaps has been in ophthalmology and, as a result, we depend on a very dedicated group of optometrists to address the vision needs of our patients which are extensive. Unfortunately, state law severely restricts the scope of their practice requiring referrals out of state or to urban areas up to 200 miles away. It can take months for us to get folks to the care they need and, in many cases, they simply go without due to lack of transportation or limited insurance coverage or, in many of our elderly, basic mobility.

While some require an ophthalmologist for their problems, a large percentage need procedures for which optometrists now routinely train including treatment for glaucoma (known as SLT) that lowers eye pressure, follow up to cataract surgery, removal of sties, etc. – all services now performed by optometrists in neighboring states including Oklahoma where we also have health centers. To limit their scope, directly impacts those of us who have chosen to remain in rural Kansas and denies those with limited resources, access to care. It also discourages these well-trained professionals from locating their practices in Kansas and without modernizing, we will likely see the new generation of optometrists opt to practice elsewhere.

Given the severe shortage of ophthalmologists throughout Kansas, it is now time to reserve their skills for the complicated surgical procedures only they can do and let our optometrists better serve their communities similar to what the Legislature has done for advanced practice nurse practitioners. It is time to recognize that Kansas has well trained optometrists who have done an amazing job of protecting the vision of all Kansans in their local communities and are very well prepared to do more.

Thank you for this opportunity to advocate on behalf of our patients, as well as the professionals with whom we rely.