

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

FROM: **Angela Meyer**
 Owner of Meyer Law Firm, LLC and on behalf of the Rural Justice
 Initiative Committee and the Kansas Bar Association

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 House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources my name is Angela Meyer, and I provide this testimony as a solo practitioner and owner of Meyer Law Firm, LLC, on behalf of the Rural Justice Initiative Committee and on behalf of the Kansas Bar Association 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.**

As a member of several organizations dedicated to enhancing access to justice in Kansas, I am proud of the ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and accessible legal process for all citizens. One of the most impactful initiatives is the efforts made by Kansas Legal Services and Kansas Bar Association's (KBA) Access to Justice committee, which have actively worked to promote legal resources for underserved communities. Additionally, the establishment of the Rural Justice Committee reflects the KBA's commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by rural areas. As an officer in the KBA, I am honored to help shape and guide the future of this crucial work, and as the incoming President for 2026-2027, I look forward to playing an active role in supporting our rural communities and encouraging future lawyers to consider relocating and practicing in these areas. Despite these promising initiatives and efforts by a variety of organizations, the legal profession in rural Kansas is facing a significant challenge. A large portion of our legal community is aging and retiring, and fewer students are choosing to enter the profession. Even more concerning, an alarmingly small percentage of these students are pursuing careers in rural areas. The impact of this trend is becoming increasingly dire in many of our rural communities.

As a lawyer practicing in Crawford County and the surrounding areas, I witness firsthand the growing consequences of this shortage, and it is evident that the situation has reached a critical point. The reported number of lawyers in our region includes not only private practitioners but also judges, prosecutors, and in-house counsel across southeast Kansas. This can create a skewed impression, making the numbers seem higher than

they truly are when it comes to available private legal services. Just a few short years ago, we had 20 attorneys willing to serve as court-appointed counsel in criminal cases; today, that number has dwindled to just three. In Crawford County, entire days of domestic court dockets are filled with litigants who must represent themselves, as there simply aren't enough attorneys to meet the demand for legal representation. In many communities throughout southeast Kansas—such as Crawford, Cherokee, and Bourbon counties—the current trajectory is unsustainable. With the demand for legal services continuing to rise, it's clear that we are headed for a crisis if immediate action isn't taken.

In my own practice, it's not uncommon to receive thirty to fifty calls per week from individuals seeking legal assistance. Each call typically requires ten to fifteen minutes to review the caller's needs and concerns and discuss potential representation, which often adds up to nearly an entire day of my time each week. While I strive to help as many people as possible, I simply cannot take on all of these potential clients, and many of my colleagues face similar challenges. As a result, it is not unusual for citizens to wait one to two months for an appointment.

In addition to addressing the critical shortage of legal services, the passage of this bill and the creation of programs to encourage young attorneys to live and practice in rural areas would bring numerous other benefits. These programs can play a key role in fostering the economic and civic development of rural communities.

As a young professional, I was welcomed with open arms by the community I now live and practice in. In fact, I found that there were more opportunities to volunteer and give back than I had time for. Rural communities are eager to see the growth and continued vitality of their civic organizations, and by increasing the number of attorneys in these areas, we also open the door to broader community and economic development. When I returned to my hometown after law school and began practicing in Bourbon County, I became involved in various local organizations, served on community boards, and contributed my time and skills outside of the practice of law.

Attorneys also serve as business mentors and owners in rural communities, further contributing to economic development. In southeast Kansas, several attorneys not only run their law practices but also own and operate businesses—ranging from cattle operations to retail ventures. These attorneys are integral to both the legal and economic fabric of their communities. Additionally, they provide valuable guidance to other local businesses, including young lawyers, helping them navigate the complexities of building and sustaining their own practices and enterprises.

Personally, I have owned and operated my own law practice for eight years, in addition to running a growing retail business. Before opening my practice, I worked at a firm in Fort Scott, where I was fortunate to be mentored by a supportive legal community. That same community shared valuable insights and advice that helped me successfully manage my practice. Today, I am proud to mentor younger attorneys who have chosen to start their own practices. We are fortunate to live in a rural community where attorneys

consistently support one another, and this culture of mentorship and collaboration will only strengthen the success of programs like this one.

HB 2174 offers a crucial solution to this pressing issue. Both the student loan forgiveness and loan repayment programs are designed to encourage law students and practitioners to live and establish their careers in rural communities across Kansas. These initiatives will also enable organizations like the Kansas Bar Association to expand their mentorship and networking efforts, helping to create a stronger, more supportive network of attorneys throughout the state. This, in turn, will provide participants with the resources and support they need to thrive in rural areas.

As an attorney in a rural community, a member of the Rural Justice Initiative, and an officer of the Kansas Bar Association, I am proud to support the program outlined in HB 2174. This initiative is specifically designed to increase the number of lawyers in rural Kansas and enhance access to justice in these underserved areas.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to stand for questions when appropriate.