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

FROM: Etta L. Walker
Attorney, P.O. Box 203, Sharon Springs, Wallace County, Kansas
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RE: Written 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.

DATE: February 12, 2025

Chairman Billinger and Members of the Committee:

I support House Bill 2174.

We need more lawyers to live and work in our rural counties in Kansas. We do not have enough lawyers to staff all child in need of care cases, criminal defense cases, and regular civil matters, from litigation to contract formation to family law matters and more.

I am an attorney in Wallace County, Kansas, the second-least populated county in Kansas and one of the 100 counties in Kansas considered "rural" and with a shortage of lawyers. I grew up in Wallace County, attended the University of Kansas, returned to Wallace County to live and work in the 1980s, and then attended law school at the University of Colorado School of Law during a period of time when public universities were affordable and we could actually work our way through school. I clerked for a federal appeals court judge, and then worked as a litigator at a large law firm in Nevada, representing large corporations and developers. I returned to my home town in 2004. For more than twenty years I have had a general, mixed practice in Eastern Colorado and Western Kansas, with a wide range of clients and subject matter.

Wallace County has two lawyers: I am 65 years old and my colleague at the other end of Main Street is not younger than I am. Our current county attorney lives in an adjoining county, and our district magistrate judge is a lay person.

In attempts to find an associate attorney to join me, for years I have been incredibly proactive. I have hosted three Dane G. Hansen Foundation summer interns through Washburn University School of Law, and I have hosted several Next-Gen high school and college students for summer jobs. The law students report that they love the work that I do, understand the incredible impact they can make, and appreciate the experience, but express great concern about their student loan debt, find the prospect of going into a small private practice financially quite scary, and simply don't come.

Why is this bill important? Because solo/small firm practice in rural areas is not immediately lucrative and the amount of debt law graduates have is in many cases equal to or even more than the cost of a house in Wallace County. We need attorneys who will take court appointments to defend

people charged with crimes, and to represent people in child in need of care and civil commitment cases. The prosecutors receive city or county benefits and KPERS, and are eligible for public service loan repayment programs, but the defense lawyers on the other side are paid at reduced hourly rates with no benefits and no loan repayment programs. Solo and small firm attorneys spend more time on administrative tasks and have no one or only some one with whom to share overhead and management responsibilities. Premiums for small group health insurance policies are expensive, and we are insurance-heavy: professional liability, business owner's coverage, worker's comp, and more. We are small businesses, and many of us employ support staff and outside contractors, such as for computer work or accounting or other business matters. Student loan repayment programs, and ultimately some benefit packages, will make these types of practices more affordable for new lawyers.

What we really need in order to serve our communities is more lawyers, and we need to find ways to get lawyers to live and work here. We turn down work almost daily. We are involved in our communities in many ways, helping with local nonprofit organizations, participating in public projects, attending county, city, and school meetings, providing pro bono (no charge) services to people who cannot afford legal services but have compelling needs, and more.

I believe that HB 2174 is an important step in the right direction. Creating student loan relief for the recent graduates will be an important incentive and should help us recruit attorneys and serve more people and businesses. It may take several years for this program to bear fruit, but I believe it will, and we need to start somewhere. These types of programs are working for attorneys who practice in government jobs, and for doctors and veterinarians. I urge you to advance HB 2174 as an investment in rural Kansas.

Sincerely,

Etta L. Walker