



Kansas County & District Attorney Association  
1200 SW 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Topeka, KS 66604

February 11, 2025

To: Chairman Rahjes and Members of the Committee:

Re: House Bill 2174-- Proponent Testimony

From: Susan H. Richmeier, Finney County Attorney and KCDA Board Member

Chairman Rahjes and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of Finney County and rural Kansas attorneys in favor of HB 2174. First, I would like to emphasize how needed a bill such as this is for our state and justice for Kansans. I praise the foresight and effort to present a bill which will have a significant impact on rural Kansans.

This is a very passionate subject for me. I have lived and practiced law in rural Kansas for 30 years and have watched the decline in practicing attorneys throughout my career. We are at a place in my judicial district and across Kansas where every single attorney has an important

role within the legal community and their retirement or career moves significantly impact the tenuous balance of justice within the community.

I have spent a significant amount of time recruiting for our office in Finney County (Garden City). Our office has not been fully staffed with attorneys in the twelve (12) years I have been county attorney. We typically run short two (2) to three (3) attorney positions within our office and it is taking continually working with law schools both in and out of Kansas to keep the limited number of attorneys we have.

When I began the recruitment process for our office, it was with the idea that it would take three (3) to five (5) years to see the fruits of our labor due to the length of time it takes to educate a lawyer. We started by creating an internship program where we could grow our own and flesh out potential attorneys who might be interested in pursuing a career in Garden City and have been taking a multi-level approach to our efforts and the recruitment process. We hope to see our first attorney this October, three (3) years after starting our program.

In the last five (5) years at least half of the bar in our judicial district has retired, leaving two (2) of our six (6) counties without a practicing attorney, three (3) of the six (6) have just one (1) practicing attorney. Those three are all retirement age. The remaining attorneys reside in Finney County and are largely within five to ten years of retirement. There isn't anyone to replace them when they do retire. There are fewer than two dozen practicing attorneys in a six-county radius and many of our defense attorneys and county contracted attorneys are traveling for two or more hours to meet the needs of our criminal caseloads, often causing delays in the judicial process. This shortage cannot be fixed by just

our Kansas law schools.

While this piece of legislation is a good start, I would encourage you to look at this from a multi-faceted angle, the ten-thousand-foot view and know we need to be looking at more things than just loan repayment supplements.

Challenges rural Kansans faces when recruiting:

- Pay differential: salaries are not comparable to counterparts in metro areas.
- Lack of resources for residents:
  - Professional organizations/mentorship
  - Entertainment
  - Social life
  - Shopping
  - Healthcare
  - Education

Thoughts for consideration:

- Please read the Kansas Rural Justice Initiative report to the Kansas Supreme Court "Examining unmet legal needs across rural Kansas". This report identifies many issues plaguing rural areas of Kansas and their ability to obtain legal services in general.
- What are the limitations to receipt of the money?
- How would it be paid out?
  - Annually, bi-annually, monthly
- Will there be a requirement for the attorney to live in the county where they practice?

- What would keep an attorney from living in Johnson County but working in Miami County?
- Is there a way to equalize or further incentivize attorneys to live in the truly rural areas of Kansas?
  - Those areas which are three (3) hours or 180 miles or more from a metropolitan area.
- Has there been consideration for preference to attorneys willing to commit to government service:
  - Prosecutors, BIDS, indigent defense attorneys.
- How would/could this legislation cooperate with rural opportunity zone (ROZ) opportunities which are only available to out-of-state people moving into Kansas, but not our own?
- What is the reasoning for the three (3) year, \$90,000 maximum for law student recipients but a five (5) year, \$100,000 maximum for attorneys moving to rural Kansas?
- If passed as is, how long would it take to stand up the advisory committee and regulations/application process?
- How does this process get promoted to our rural Kansas attorneys for use?

Thank you for taking my thoughts and concerns into consideration as you contemplate the merits of this measure. I wholeheartedly support the need to find ways to entice attorneys and envelop them in the beauty of rural Kansas to keep them here. This measure would help in doing so.

I would be happy to answer any questions at this time. Thank you.

Susan H. Richmeier

Finney County Attorney