



**KANSAS BAR
ASSOCIATION**

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

FROM: Joseph Molina
On behalf of 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 Billinger and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources my name is Joseph Molina, and I provide this testimony 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.**

The Kansas Bar Association has a rich history of supporting efforts that increase Access to Justice for Kansas citizens. Our members have championed online access to courts, drafted forms for *pro se* individuals, partnered with local bars on legal education events, worked with law students through our foundation, and volunteered our time at expungement clinics. The KBA Access to Justice Committee coordinates the KBA Lawyer Referral Service for individuals needing legal assistance, directs the Free Legal Answers program that helps individuals with legal questions through an online portal, and organizes the Pillars of the Bar, a Pro Bono award for Kansas lawyers. It is these programs where our members volunteer, organize, craft, direct, and coordinate that demonstrates our commitment to serving Kansas citizens and ensuring their access to the courts. As such, the Kansas Bar Association is proud to support the program outlined in SB 214, a program designed to increase the number of lawyers in rural Kansas and improve Access to Justice in those underserved areas.

As you are all well aware, Kansas faces a critical shortage of lawyers in rural areas. The report released last fall by the Rural Justice Initiative found that nearly 50% of Kansas' population reside in rural areas but only 20% of lawyers work in those areas. Shockingly,

more lawyers work in Kansas City, MO than in 100 Kansas counties. The issue is so profound that there are no lawyers living or working in two Kansas counties.

This scarcity impacts every facet of the justice system: Judges struggle to find lawyers for court-appointed criminal defense work, rural lawyers are overwhelmed with legal cases and clients must travel long distances to meet with an attorney who may likely be unfamiliar with the area, judicial district and sometimes local rules. The budget for the Board of Indigent Defense Services is strained paying for “windshield time” for court-appointed counsel. The lack of legal representation causes delays in court cases, increasing the cost of legal work, and directly impacts an individuals access to the courts.

SB 214 provides two solutions to this problem, the first focuses on law students and encourages them to establish their careers in these underserved areas through a student loan **forgiveness** program, which would provide meaningful incentives for law students to attend one of the two in-state law schools and use their legal training to serve rural communities. As discussed in the Rural Justice Initiative Report, a significant number of law students are deterred from practice in rural communities due to substantial student loan debt. This initial investment in law students will alleviate one of those rural practice concerns.

The second way to alleviate concerns of rural practice is through the student loan **repayment** program. This program focuses on existing lawyers licensed to practice in the state who live and work in a rural community and who also have outstanding student loan debt. SB 214 would provide qualified individuals with \$20,000 annually for student loan repayment.

The KBA believes that these programs will begin to turn the tide for these underserved areas. Lawyers and law students alike will be encouraged to settle in these communities due to a lessened financial anxiety.

The KBA also understands that SB 214, while a substantial investment, does not eliminate the problem. Mentorship, networking, professional development and camaraderie also play a part in establishing/maintaining a legal practice in a new community. As such, the KBA is proud to announce the creation of the Kansas Bar Association Rural Justice Committee, established to assist rural lawyers and the specialized needs of a rural practice.

It is for these reasons that the KBA proudly supports the efforts by the Rural Justice Initiative to increase the number of lawyers in rural Kansas communities through SB 214. Thank you for your time and attention. I am happy to stand for questions when appropriate.

About the Kansas Bar Association:

The Kansas Bar Association (KBA) was founded in 1882 as a voluntary association for dedicated legal professionals. Its more than 5,500 members include lawyers, judges, law students, and paralegals. www.ksbar.org