



TO: Kansas House Committee on Health and Human Services
Representative Brenda Landwehr, Chair
Representative John Eplee, Vice Chair

FROM: Drew Talbott
President, Ascension Via Christi Pittsburg

SUBJECT: Testimony in support of House Bill 2637: Expanding eligibility for rural emergency hospital licensure to facilities that meet criteria at any point after 2015.

DATE: February 6, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Landwehr, Vice Chair Eplee and members of the committee. My name is Drew Talbott. I currently serve as the President at Ascension Via Christi Hospital in Pittsburg. I am here today to testify in support of House Bill 2637, which would expand eligibility for rural emergency hospital licensure (HB2637). Thank you for hearing this bill, which is designed to provide hospital systems, including Ascension Via Christi, access to adequate reimbursement for services and, in so doing, help sustain important and needed healthcare services for our rural communities.

The challenges of rural hospitals have been well documented, and as many rural hospitals have closed, Ascension Via Christi and other providers have tried to maintain limited, but critically important, services by opening rural emergency departments. Unfortunately, under current conditions, the high volume of uninsured patients has led to an insufficient revenue stream, making these facilities financially unsustainable. As a result of these challenges, in December 2023, we had to close our emergency department in Fort Scott.

With HB 2637, Kansas has the opportunity to recognize the critical role of these small, rural emergency departments in serving the public, providing essential services, and improving health outcomes. As proposed, the bill would retroactively qualify these facilities for licensure as rural emergency hospitals so long as they – or the preceding hospital facility – otherwise met eligibility standards between January 1, 2015, and December 26, 2020. This is critically important because it would allow the rural emergency departments in Fort Scott, Wellington and Independence that were established after their community hospitals closed-- to qualify for the adequate levels of reimbursement for services necessary to be financially viable.

Although the Fort Scott emergency department closed in December, it would still qualify under HB 2637, which could encourage another party to reopen the facility and resume treatment and care services there. HB 2637 offers the best way forward for restoring healthcare services in Fort Scott and preserving emergency healthcare services in Independence and Wellington. Please know that we are continuing to work with Senator Moran and other stakeholders to amend federal law, too, because that is the second critical piece of this effort. We remain optimistic that the effort in Washington will be successful, but it can only be successful with your support for HB 2637.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We urge you to approve this important measure and help us preserve emergency healthcare services in our rural communities.