



KANSAS Rural Justice Initiative

Executive Summary

Final Committee Report

December 2024

Kansas faces a critical shortage of attorneys in its rural communities. This crisis threatens access to justice, undermines economic development, and weakens the social fabric of rural Kansas.

The Scope of the Crisis

The shortage is severe and widespread: while nearly half of Kansas's population resides in rural areas, only 20% of Kansas attorneys working in the state practice there. In 99 of Kansas' 100 rural counties, the per-capita attorney population is about half of the nationwide average. In 39 of those counties, it's one-fourth or less. And two counties have no attorneys. In fact, more Kansas attorneys work in Kansas City, Missouri, than in all rural Kansas.

This scarcity affects the justice system in multiple ways. Rural judges often struggle to find counsel for cases where representation is required by law. Existing attorneys in these areas are turning away potential clients because they are already overworked and struggling to meet the legal needs of their communities. As a result, residents and businesses must travel long distances to access legal services, and some may forgo legal assistance entirely due to these barriers.

The problem is poised to worsen in coming years. Rural Kansas attorneys are, on average,

older than their urban counterparts. As these experienced practitioners retire, there are not enough new attorneys stepping in to replace them. Law school applications are declining, and recent law school graduates often avoid rural practice, deterred by factors such as substantial student debt, the prospect of lower salaries, fear of professional isolation, and perceived lifestyle challenges associated with rural living.

Strategic Response

To respond to these challenges, Chief Justice Marla Luckert established the Rural Justice Initiative Committee, which includes appellate and trial judges, state legislators, rural attorneys, and representatives from state agencies, law schools, and rural-focused organizations. The committee conducted surveys of rural Kansas attorneys and law students at both Kansas law schools, held listening sessions in rural communities across the state, and consulted experts in various fields. It also closely studied successful programs from other states and professions, particularly those addressing rural doctor and veterinarian shortages. In response to their findings, the committee issued a report that proposes 10 recommendations to address the rural attorney shortage. These proposals aim to tackle the financial, professional, and cultural factors that contribute to the problem.

Key recommendations include:

- The establishment of a rural-attorney training program that would offer tuition incentives to Washburn and Kansas law students who commit to practicing in rural areas. This program draws inspiration from highly successful initiatives designed to attract doctors and veterinarians to rural communities;
- A loan-repayment program to encourage attorneys to practice in rural areas;
- The formation of a professional organization for rural attorneys, which would provide support, networking and mentorship opportunities, and resources tailored to the unique needs of rural practitioners; and
- The transition to a standing, rather than ad-hoc, Rural Justice Initiative Committee to facilitate implementation of approved recommendations, monitor results, and continue to study trends and developments relevant to rural justice and attorney shortages in Kansas.

The Path Forward

Addressing the rural attorney shortage requires a comprehensive, long-term approach. It also requires coordinated action between the three branches of state government, our two Kansas law schools, leaders in our local communities,

and non-profit and business organizations across our state. While some of the Committee's recommendations may yield quick improvements, others will need sustained commitment over time to show results. This crisis is not a problem to be solved overnight.

The path forward requires commitment and collaboration. As attorneys continue to leave rural Kansas, these communities lose more than legal representation—they lose civic leaders, local board members, and key economic contributors. The Committee's recommendations provide a roadmap to preserve these vital roles, but their success hinges on collective action. Our rural communities deserve nothing less than our full dedication to solving this pressing issue.

Read the Full Report

This is an executive summary of the report for the Kansas Supreme Court. Detailed discussions of each recommendation, along with extensive citations to the resources used by the Committee are contained in the report, which can be found at: <https://kscourts.gov/About-the-Courts/Court-Administration/Committees/Kansas-Rural-Justice-Initiative-Committee> or scan the QR code below.

