

# Committee formed to study lack of attorneys in rural Kansas



**From KSNT** By Matthew Self, December 1, 2022

An order signed on December 1 by Kansas Supreme Court Chief Justice Marla Luckert is set to help fulfill the legal needs of rural Kansans.

Lisa Taylor, the public information director for the Kansas Judicial Branch, says the order will create the Kansas Rural Justice Initiative Committee. This committee will examine the unmet legal needs in rural Kansas related to a decreasing number of attorneys living and working in rural areas.

Luckert said the trend toward fewer attorneys in rural areas is not something that is unique to Kansas. She also said attorneys in rural areas tend to be older, with some working well beyond retirement age because there is no one available to take over the work.

“What’s happening here is happening across the nation,” Luckert said. “For state courts, it might mean a smaller pool of attorneys seeking to fill judge positions when a sitting judge retires. For rural residents, it could mean choosing between going to

court without an attorney and hiring an out-of-county attorney with additional costs.”

Taylor said the ratio of active attorneys to population ranges from two for every 535 residents in urban areas to one for every 808 residents in rural areas in Kansas.

Two counties, Wichita and Hodgeman, have no attorneys while five other counties only have access to one attorney.

The chair of the committee will be Justice K.J. Wall. He says he is encouraged the committee will be able to explain the full spectrum of issues tied to limited attorney availability in rural areas.

“We’ve pulled together a diverse group of people who have both insight and interest in this issue,” Wall said. “I look forward to working with the committee to uncover and find ways to overcome challenges created when there are too few attorneys in rural areas.”

Taylor said the committee will consist of 35 members and will include representatives from all three branches of state government, the legal and business communities, law schools and organizations that serve victims of sexual or domestic violence. The committee will study general population trends along with trends related to attorneys and other legal professionals who support court and court-adjacent programs over the course of 18 months.

It will also look for differences in unmet legal needs related to population density, according to Taylor. The committee will explore efforts to recruit and retain legal professionals in rural areas and look at programs highlighted by the National Center for State Courts Racial Justice Collaborative.

Following the end of the 18-month review, the committee will submit its initial recommendations to the Kansas Supreme Court, according to Taylor. These recommendations could include proposals to change laws, regulations or rules in an effort to make attorney services more available.

The following people have been appointed to serve on the committee:

- Justice K.J. Wall, Kansas Supreme Court, chair
- Judge Kim R. Schroeder, Kansas Court of Appeals
- Chief Judge Daniel D. Creitz, 31st Judicial District
- Chief Judge Kevin Berens, 15th Judicial District
- District Judge Tom Drees, 23rd Judicial District
- District Judge Richard Marquez, 25th Judicial District
- District Magistrate Judge Regine Thompson, 12th Judicial District
- Senator Elaine Bowers, District 36
- Representative Tory Marie Blew, District 112
- Stephen B. Angermayer, Attorney, Pittsburg
- Paige Bangerter, attorney, Dodge City
- Andrew Bolton, attorney, Louisburg
- Stacey Blakeman, Assistant Dean of Career Services, University of Kansas, Lawrence
- Ashley D. Comeau, attorney, Plainville
- Alan Cobb, Kansas Chamber of Commerce, Topeka
- Aaron Cunningham, attorney, Hays
- Timothy Demel, attorney, Beloit
- Shirley Fessler, Director of Outreach and Accessibility, Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Topeka
- Wendee D. Grady, Assistant General Counsel and Director of Legal Foundation, Kansas Farm Bureau, Manhattan
- Marilyn Harp, Executive Director, Kansas Legal Services, Topeka
- Joslyn Kusiak, attorney, Independence
- Shawn Leisinger, Associate Dean for Centers and External Programs, Externship Director, Washburn University School of Law, Topeka
- Angela Meyer, attorney, Pittsburg
- Joshua Ney, Jefferson County Attorney, Oskaloosa
- Charles Peckham, attorney, Atwood
- Trisha Purdon, Office of Rural Prosperity, Kansas Department of Commerce, Coffeyville
- Brad Ralph, attorney, Dodge City
- David J. Rebein, attorney, Dodge City
- Wendy Rohleder-Sook, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Director of Pre-Law/Legal Studies at Fort Hays State University, Hays
- Ann Sagan, Director of Special Projects for the Kansas Board of Indigents' Defense Services, Topeka

- Sally Shattuck, attorney, Ashland
- Brien Stockman, attorney and Dane G. Hansen Foundation Trustee, Logan
- Etta L. Walker, attorney, Sharon Springs
- Jake Worcester, Kansas 4-H Foundation, Manhattan
- Jill Zimmerman, Kansas Agriculture and Rural Leadership Program, Manhattan

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