

***Kansas Farm Bureau
Policy Statement***

**Senate Committee on Utilities
SB 398; An Act concerning Kan-ed**

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Submitted by:
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Chairman Apple and Members of the Committee:

Kansas Farm Bureau appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on Senate Bill 398, relating to Kan-ed. I am Harry A. Watts, Director of Governmental Relations.

Kansas Farm Bureau represents 40,000 farmers and ranchers living in all 105 counties of Kansas. Through our rural development research, we've found that each community needs a vibrant K-12 education system, healthcare services and job creation to expand the economic diversity of our rural communities. That's why Kan-ed is such an important economic benefit to rural areas across the state.

We support every home and business in Kansas having access to high-speed broadband service at a reasonable cost. We believe that this right extends to other entities, such as rural hospitals, schools and libraries.

I will touch briefly on each of these three critical areas and how Kan-ed is so crucial to them in rural Kansas.

Rural Kansans deserve a strong healthcare system with a vibrant telemedicine component; rural schools, both K-12 and higher education, require a strong distance learning program that will deliver the knowledge rural students need to compete in a global workforce. Rural public libraries need high-speed broadband to provide access to knowledge that helps create new jobs in rural communities.

As we look to the future for rural healthcare, we believe that expanding telemedicine programs will address one of the state's biggest concerns: the continued shortage of rural health care professionals. Having access to telemedicine services will allow highly specialized doctors to offer rural patients the same level of care that's available to their

urban counterparts. These medical professionals use the Kan-ed distance learning network to participate in continuing education classes without time-consuming and costly travel. Without this kind of network, hospitals across the state will certainly see increased costs, decreased reliability and concerns about decreased network security.

Schools work with other schools through interactive distance learning. For example, the Southeast Kansas Educational Service Centers provide 47 school districts with more than 100 interactive video classrooms, allowing thousands of students across the state to access high school and college classes each day. These are classes that rural districts simply cannot provide; distance learning allows rural students to have access to classes that our urban students take for granted. Distance learning could not be done effectively without a high speed broadband network.

We believe that libraries, through high speed broadband internet service, can give patrons the ability to jumpstart new entrepreneurial business opportunities and to expand small business development. Libraries provide access to broadband service to those in the community who cannot get internet on their farms/ranches and also to citizens who simply cannot afford these services.

Kansas Farm Bureau urges the Legislature to fund Kan-ed at the current level through June 30, 2014.

We also request a complete needs assessment of Kan-ed services to all rural libraries, schools and hospitals, not just current Kan-ed members. The Kan-ed Advisory Council should design the needs assessment, implement and monitor the assessment and provide a specific recommendation to the state legislature. The assessment should be conducted between July 1, 2012 and June 30, 2013.

The Council should then receive the third party findings and, between July and December, 2013, develop a report with recommendations to the Legislature. The Legislature could then enact legislation during the 2014 session to implement those recommendations into law before the Kan-ed current funding level expires June 30, 2014.

The assessment should include but not be limited to:

- We don't really know what the high speed broadband needs are for rural Kansas;
- We don't know what the future holds regarding technological advances in high-speed internet, distance learning and other video services;
- We don't know the costs for providing high speed broadband service for rural schools, hospitals and libraries. Once we know the costs, we can develop a formula to determine how to pay for high speed broadband internet and who pays for it;
- This effort should include a wide range of grassroots technical training to show rural citizens and communities what's available to them;

- Although there's uncertainty at this time about the FCC's Universal Service Fund (USF), this money could possibly be used to fund high-speed broadband throughout underserved and unserved parts of rural Kansas.
- There may be an opportunity to tap into the Kansas Universal Service Fund to pay for the needs assessment and subsidize services.

Kan-ed, over the last 10 years, has provided this state with a solid broadband network that plays a critical role for rural anchor institutions. Decommissioning Kan-ed without a thorough evaluation would not be in the best interest of rural Kansans.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the importance of Kan-ed to rural communities. I'm happy to answer any questions.