



TO: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources
Senator Kerschen, Chair

FROM: Dr. Eilene Minnix, Kansas Veterinary Medical Association

RE: Testimony on HB 2605 relating to Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas

DATE: March 11, 2022

Chairman Kerschen and members of the Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit testimony before this committee in support of HB 2605 relating to the Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas (VTPRK). My name is Dr. Eilene Minnix. I am providing this testimony in my role as Past President of the Kansas Veterinary Medical Association. The KVMA is the only statewide professional membership organization dedicated exclusively to veterinary medicine and the interests of the veterinary team.

In 2006, the Kansas legislature signed into law the Veterinary Training Program for Rural Kansas (VTPRK). The program authorized the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine to enter into agreements with up to five, first-year veterinary students who would be eligible for student loan forgiveness in exchange for practicing veterinary medicine in a rural Kansas community. The VTPRK was designed to incentivize Kansas students to remain in the state and fulfill the needs of our rural communities.

The program has proven to be successful over the past 15 years serving over 80 recipients. 94% of the recipients are still practicing in an eligible community today. A \$400,000 per year investment in the future of veterinary medicine in rural Kansas has certainly been Kansas taxpayers' money well spent.

We consistently hear there is a shortage of veterinarians to provide care in rural Kansas. A flood of requests come in to the KVMA office by Kansas veterinary practitioners to add job posting for veterinary associate positions they often struggle to fill. Just this year in a Senate committee hearing, two legislators shared their desire to support incentives to help veterinary medicine in rural Kansas.

Through the Task Force on Veterinary Workforce Development, of which members include the KVMA, Kansas Department of Agriculture, Kansas Livestock Association, Kansas Farm Bureau, Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine, and Kansas State University Department of Animal Sciences and Industry, a survey was used to collect data on veterinary services utilized by Kansas livestock producers. The data was then combined with the total number of mixed animal practice veterinarians in the state as well as number of cattle in a geographic location. This information has been instrumental in identifying

areas of need. As we think about filling these gaps, the VTPRK is a proven program that delivers on its' purpose – to develop graduate veterinarians for rural practice in Kansas.

Now is the time to enhance this program to ensure rural communities in Kansas have access to veterinary services – all across the state. The proposed changes in HB 2605 set out to accomplish four things: to create an advisory committee to serve over the program; to change the student eligibility criteria; to provide more flexibility in the funding dollars; and to expand where a recipient may practice as it relates to rural Kansas and food animal medicine.

I would like to take this time to discuss each area of proposed change in HB 2605.

In 2006, HB 3005 was passed and signed into law. It authorized Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine to enter into agreements with five first year veterinary students. The college of veterinary medicine faculty/staff establish the program guidelines and select recipients. There has been concern regarding the administration of the program being solely at the discretion of the college. Some of the issues brought forward include: Should faculty and staff select the recipients? Is the first year the best time to select students or would a later time in their education be more appropriate? Are the courses and programs being taught preparing students for veterinary practice in rural Kansas?

HB 2605 requests the addition of an advisory committee that will serve over the program to help select students, determine the needs of the program, and provide input to the college. The advisory board shall consist of two representatives from the Kansas Veterinary Medical Association; the Animal Health Commissioner; two members appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture; and two representatives from the College of Veterinary Medicine. Input from the advisory committee is welcomed from college administration. The college sees this as a positive opportunity to grow the program and ensure needs are being met.

Currently by statute, students must apply for VTPRK in their first semester of veterinary school. The college selects five first year veterinary students to complete the program. While this method allows for maximum exposure to VTPRK extra programs and courses, it seems to limit a student's ability to find passion in large animal medicine and take advantage of the program. The proposed bill removes "up to five first year" and "per year" from the bill allowing the advisory committee flexibility to select recipients at any time during their veterinary education if funding is available. While there are additional educational experiences for VTPRK students, the program coordinator for VTPRK has indicated a willingness to explore options for students in the latter years of their education.

Student tuition has increased since the establishment of the VTPRK. In 2006, each participant received a loan for \$20,000 per year to cover tuition, books, supplies, and travel expenses associated with the program. HB 2605 requests striking \$20,000 and inserting "an amount not to exceed \$25,000" per year. This provides flexibility for the advisory committee and program administrators to expand the number of recipients if funding is available. Currently, the state of Kansas appropriates \$400,000 for the program. If funding remains at \$400,000 or additional dollars are appropriated, the program will have the ability to award equal to or smaller scholarships to more students.

The last area of recommended change is acceptable areas VTRPK recipient must practice veterinary medicine to fulfill the obligation of the program. Today, to fulfill the obligation of the VTRPK and receive forgiveness of the loan, a recipient must practice veterinary medicine for a period of at least 12 continuous months for each separate year a student receives a loan. The student must practice in any county in Kansas that has a population not exceeding 35,000. The proposed change of county population to “40,000 or registered veterinary premise under a licensed veterinarian if food animal patients make up at least 50% of such veterinarian’s practice” provides an opportunity for practices outside of urban areas who practice primarily large animal medicine to attract a VTRPK student. Practices in these areas are competing more and more with corporate veterinary practices where new graduates are offered \$121,000 per year for a 3-day work week. Independent large animal practices in communities like Goddard are struggling to hire associates because of this.

As county populations fluctuate, the increase in population eliminates the following counties according the 2020 Census: Johnson County, Sedgwick County, Shawnee County, Wyandotte County, Douglas County, Leavenworth County, Riley County, Reno County, and Saline County. We recently heard from individuals in Johnson, Butler and Sedgwick counties regarding the difficulty of hiring associates. As you can see, based on population alone these counties would not be eligible for a VTRPK recipient. Serving food animal patients in Kansas is essential to public safety, regardless of your address. Therefore, the additional criteria of a veterinary premise with at least 50% of food animal patients is necessary as we move forward.

The same economic, gender, and cultural challenges facing the Kansas veterinary profession and impacting the Kansas agricultural economy fifteen years ago remain in effect today. Now is not the time to ignore this important program.

In closing, the KVMA supports additional financial resources for Kansas residents who do not attend veterinary school in-state but have a desire to return to practice in rural Kansas or food animal medicine. However, the VTRPK program was established to support graduates of Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine and this funding and program should remain.

I urge the committee to support HB 2605 – passing this bill is a WIN for rural Kansas, livestock producers, and animal health from east to west. Thank you for your opportunity to provide testimony today. I will stand at the appropriate time for questions.