

SB 2211
Senate Workforce Development Committee
January 31, 2025
Testimony of Scott Johnson

Chair Wobbema and members of the committee, for the record, my name is Scott Johnson. I am the deputy state court administrator.

SB 2211 is before you today to authorize the supreme court to look at both recruitment and retention of attorneys who may seek to participate in the rural attorney recruitment program. Additionally, the bill authorizes to the supreme court to look at counties in light of the total number of attorneys available (five or fewer) instead of the population (currently limited to 16,000). This change could focus the program more on where there are "legal deserts" in the state. There are currently 36 counties that meet the definition of five or less attorneys (map attached).

The rural attorney recruitment program was created by the legislature in 2021 to provide a monetary incentive for attorneys to live and work in rural communities. To be eligible for the program an attorney must be licensed in ND and in good standing with the ND Board of Bar Examiners and if so, are automatically eligible to participate in the program upon receipt of their application.

For a community to eligible to participate they must have a population of 5,000 or less and as I noted a county must have a population of 16,000 or less. Their applications are reviewed by an adhoc committee appointed by the Chief Justice (currently chaired by Judge Michael Hurly of the NEJD). They make recommendations to the supreme court which either approves or denies the application.

The cost of the program is split between the state (50%), participating community (35%) and the State Bar Association (15%). The incentive payment totals \$45,000 to be paid in five equal annual installments.

Since the program started, we have had four recruitment efforts. We have nine communities/counties that have been approved for participation and eight attorneys. We current have six attorney/community matches. Four of the matches are in Walsh County (three with the city Grafton), one in Rolette County and one in Bowman County. Additionally, at its most recent meeting -- the ad hoc committee has recommended that the supreme court approve an application made by Wells County. If that recommendation is approved by the supreme court, there will be one match left on the cap on the number of participants that has been authorized at eight.

I urge a do pass on SB 2211 and am available for your questions.

North Dakota Attorneys by County

