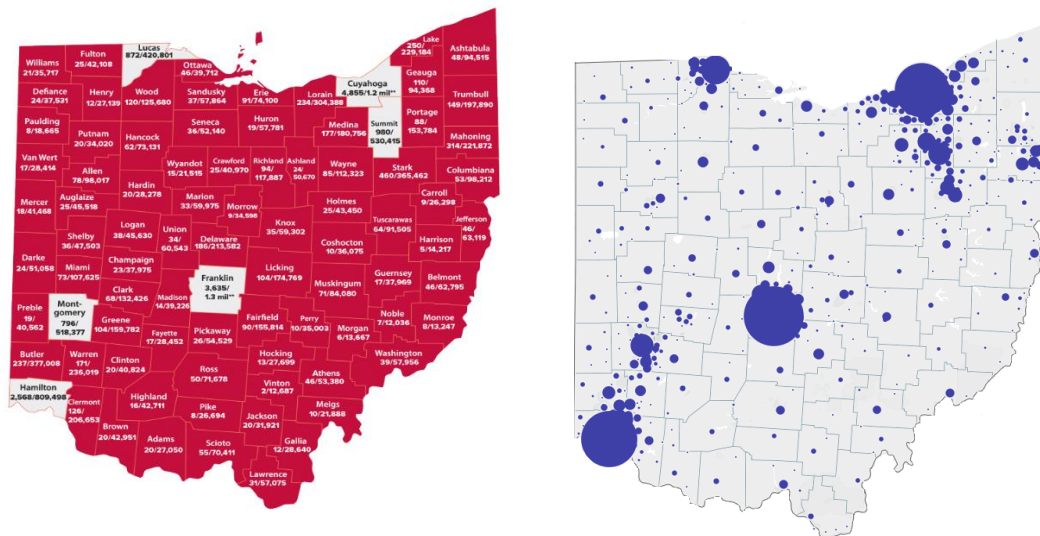


## STATEMENT OF THE OHIO STATE BAR ASSOCIATION IN SUPPORT OF THE RURAL PRACTICE INCENTIVE PROGRAM

Before the House Finance Committee  
Representative Brian Stewart, Chair

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, the Ohio Bar appreciates the opportunity to provide written remarks on two key access to justice initiatives in current law, which we hope to retain through House Bill 96.

Ohio is facing a growing shortage of available attorneys. Currently, 82 of 88 counties in Ohio are considered underserved, with fewer than one attorney per 700 residents (represented by the red counties in the map on the left below). The Rural Practice Incentive Program was enacted via House Bill 150 of the 134th General Assembly to help combat this problem and encourage attorneys to practice in underserved areas of the state. The program offers student loan repayment support for prosecutors, public defenders, and court appointed counsel that agree to practice in underserved areas of the state (the map on the right shows concentrated locations of current attorneys). With an initial appropriation of \$1.5 million, the program just closed on its inaugural year and saw strong interest and participation from newer attorneys willing to commit to practicing in communities outside of the major metropolitan areas.



While not included in the Governor's proposed budget, the Ohio Bar recommends inclusion of continued funding of the Rural Practice Incentive Program at \$1.5 million per year to build on the initial success of this program. Additionally, we support expanding program eligibility to any private practice attorney working in an underserved area. As we've explored this issue, we've learned attorney shortages are not limited by practice area. Expanding program eligibility would greatly improve the ability to recruit new lawyers to underserved communities for all legal needs.

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Along with the shortage of attorneys, access to justice gaps continue to grow for low-income Ohioans, especially in rural communities. The Ohio Bar also encourages state financial support of civil legal aid.

Having fewer attorneys available presents additional geographic challenges to serving all areas of the state. However, through the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation, funding for legal aid makes major impacts in communities across Ohio. Legal aid provides critical civil legal services that reduce barriers to employment (like helping Ohioans seal or expunge criminal records or reinstate suspended driver's licenses), assist veterans, stabilize housing, protect seniors and victims of domestic violence, and more.

Last session, through the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation, the Legislature committed \$2 million over the biennium to support civil legal services for veterans and those suffering substance abuse issues. We strongly encourage continued support of these two initiatives as well as any dedicated funding that the Legislature may be willing to allocate to needed civil legal services for low-income Ohioans.

While there are many challenges ahead, the Ohio Bar is actively working to address the shortage of attorneys in communities across Ohio, and we look forward to continued partnership with the General Assembly on these and other important issues.