



TO: Members of the Assembly Committee on Mining and Rural Development
DATE: February 4, 2016
RE: Assembly Bill 794
FROM: Kara O'Connor, Wisconsin Farmers Union,
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Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to share comments on Assembly Bill 794 today. My name is Kara O'Connor and I am the Government Relations Director for Wisconsin Farmers Union.

Student loan reimbursements can be a useful tool for attracting talented individuals to our rural communities which continue to lose young people to urban and suburban areas. However, the bill as currently written attempts to lure out-of-state residents to rural areas by offering loan forgiveness and excludes our very own Wisconsin residents from taking advantage of the program. Wisconsin Farmers Union members are, as you would guess, from Wisconsin and would greatly appreciate the opportunity to take advantage of this program and return to their rural hometowns to live, work, and raise a family. However, with crushing student loan debt, they are often forced to find a job in the city and cannot afford to return to where they grew up. We encourage the committee to amend the bill to target student loan reimbursements to Wisconsin residents in order to keep our kids in Wisconsin.

Second, the bill uses too broad of a brush to define rural areas. The bill allows students who establish residency in a rural county to apply for student loan reimbursement. However, the bill defines a rural county as "a county that does not include a metropolitan statistical area as delineated by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget." There are 12 metropolitan statistical areas in Wisconsin including the cities of Eau Claire, Wausau, Fond du Lac, Madison, Janesville and others. A recent graduate who wanted to move to a rural part of Eau Claire County in Representative Bernier's district would not be able to apply for reimbursement. The same goes for someone wanting to move to rural Marathon County in Chairman Kulp's district, a rural area in Fond du Lac County in Representative Kremer's district, rural Rock County in Representative Spreitzer's district, or just outside of Representative Billings' district to rural parts of La Crosse County. Someone wanting to move to rural Dane county, which according to the most recent Census of Agriculture by the USDA had over 2,700 farms and 500,000 acres in production, would not be able to take advantage of the program either.

A much more sensible definition of rural areas can be found in Representative Brooks' Rural Physician Residency Program bill, AB 797, which will be heard in committee later today. The bill defines rural as "a city, town, or village that has a population of less than 20,000 and that is at least 15 miles from any city, town, or village that has a population of at least 20,000." This definition is more narrowly tailored and allows the kind of flexibility to the program that the current definition does not. Counties such as Marathon, Dane, and Eau Claire that are largely composed of rural areas should not be excluded from this bill.

We encourage the committee to amend the bill to this more reasonable definition, and to allow Wisconsin residents to participate. Wisconsin Farmers Union opposes the bill as currently written, but hopes to support the bill if these changes are made.



TOM TIFFANY

STATE SENATOR • 12TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony on Assembly Bill 794

Assembly Committee on Mining, and Rural Development

I want to thank Chairman Kulp and members of the committee for hearing Assembly Bill 794 today.

Assembly Bill 794 is one piece of legislation included in the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. The Rural Wisconsin Initiative is a push to draw attention to many of the problems facing rural Wisconsin. The four core issues the initiative attempts to address include education, health care, technology, and workforce development.

In many parts of rural Wisconsin, people are moving away in favor of more populated areas. This hurts the rural economies as businesses often struggle to locate educated individuals who have the necessary skills or training they need.

In attempt to address this issue and attract educated individuals to rural parts of the state, Assembly Bill 794 creates rural opportunity zones. In these zones, \$25,000 or 40% of a new resident's student loans would be repaid, provided the new resident maintained a full time job, avoided public assistance, received a degree, and lived in a county that fit the OMB's definition of rural.

A similar program was pioneered in Kansas and Oklahoma had has been a strong incentive for individuals to relocate to rural areas after finishing their post-secondary education. In fact, Kansas has maintained the program for four years and has attracted more than 1,000 new residents through a similar program.

I want to thank Representatives Ed Brooks, Romains Quinn, and Travis Tranel for their work on this bill, and I would also like to thank members of the committee for hearing this bill today. Please support Assembly Bill 794.



EDWARD BROOKS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Testimony – Assembly Bill 794
Assembly Committee on Mining and Rural Development

February 4th, 2016

Chairman Kulp and Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today in favor of Assembly Bill 794, which establishes Rural Opportunity Zones in the state of Wisconsin.

As someone who has spent his entire life in rural Wisconsin, I know that our communities have a lot to offer young families. However, Wisconsin's small towns and villages are not exempt from the trends of the last fifty years. The American population has been shifting away from rural areas toward cities and suburbs, and many rural counties in Wisconsin are losing or barely maintaining population.

Loss of population causes a downward spiral. As a population decreases, local businesses lose their consumer base, and new businesses look to locate elsewhere as the workforce shrinks. School districts that lose population also lose funding, which leads to fewer class offerings, and fewer incentives that would attract young high quality teachers to the district. We need to find a way to maintain and grow our population.

To that end, we are proposing the creation of rural opportunity zones, a concept pioneered in Kansas and Oklahoma, that would incentivize young people looking to relocate after finishing their post-secondary education.

In our vision of the program, Wisconsin would repay up to \$25,000 or 40% of a new resident's student loans, provided the new resident maintained a full time job, avoided public assistance, had attained a post-secondary degree, and settled in a county that fit the Federal OMB's definition of rural.

This is an idea whose time has come. Representative Petryk, who is a co-author on this bill, also authored and introduced a similar bill earlier this session that I

am co-sponsoring, as are several members of this committee. I think the parallel development of these two bills shows that Wisconsin is in need of these opportunity zones, and I'm happy to take any questions at this time.



TO: Assembly Committee on Mining and Rural Development
Representative Kulp, Chair

FROM: Jeremy Levin, MHA, Director of Advocacy

DATE: February 4, 2016

RE: SUPPORT Rural Wisconsin Initiative

The Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative (RWHC), owned and operated by forty rural community hospitals, thanks you for this opportunity to share our thoughts on the seven bills that comprise the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. RWHC thanks the 21 lawmakers who have authored this effort.

RWHC has long supported cross-sector collaboration and realizes the need to improve more than just community health status, and that is why we wholeheartedly support the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. Some of our member hospitals have taken to community initiatives aimed at retaining a younger workforce by collaborating with high schools and tech schools to make sure students will have the skills needed to match the jobs available and other members have worked with employers in the area to make sure there is adequate child care available to entice young families to their communities and the jobs available.

AB793

Attracting and retaining good teachers is a challenge for rural schools. Health care has faced similar workforce challenges and one tool to attract health care workers have been loan forgiveness programs; these should be tried to attract new teachers, too. Such a program could help new teachers decide where to settle and where to teach, just as health care loan forgiveness programs are tied to practice. It would also encourage students interested in teaching to come back to their hometowns after their educations are complete, rural health education programs, such as the Wisconsin Academy Rural Medicine, seek a rural background to also gauge chance to practice in rural areas.

AB794

This bill requires the Higher Educational Aids Board to make student loan reimbursement payments on behalf of rural county residents. These "rural opportunity zones" will look to incentivize young people looking to relocate after finishing their post-secondary education. Currently, the demographics of rural areas skew older than more urban and suburban areas in the state; likewise, rural health care providers reflect these demographics and as they retire, good health care jobs will be available.

AB795

RWHC believes that the \$500,000 increase in Youth Apprenticeship program is another valuable tool for students. The program is designed for high school students who want hands-on learning in an occupational area



with classroom instruction. The funds go to rural schools, tech colleges and businesses that are working together to equip students with the skills they will need to succeed in their local industries.

AB796

The increase in the Apprenticeship Completion Award program, which partially reimburses eligible apprentices, sponsors and employers for certain costs of related instruction, will continue to support “on the job” training. Health care has had a long history in apprenticeship learning across different health provider professionals. This can support other health care focused entities like the Wisconsin Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) that seeks to improve access to quality health care by developing community-based health professions training programs and enhancing health education resources across the state by allowing students to experience firsthand the challenges, opportunities and rewards of health professions.

AB797

This bill supports the Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program (WRPRAP), which has successfully drawn physicians to rural communities. In 2011, RWHC Proposed the Wisconsin Rural Training Track Collaborative to the WRPRAP for start-up funding. In just three years these funds have made it possible to grow from the Collaborative’s initial eight organizations interested in developing and sustaining rural graduate medical education (GME) funding, to 28 hospitals, clinics, and residencies investigating and developing rural GME, and that number is growing. The new bill would propose an increase of WRPRAP funding by \$250,000, to strengthen residency programs for doctors pursuing obstetrics and gynecology specialties.

AB798

We support enhanced funding for rural broadband expansion grants. In 2007, RWHC Information Technology Network (ITN) incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization dedicated to providing member hospitals with shared health information services. In 2013, RWHC ITN became one of the first networks in the country to be designated as a Healthcare Connect Fund (HCF) Consortium, helping 29 hospitals and nearly 70 sites apply for broadband funding through the new FCC HCF subsidy program.

AB799

The proposed Rural STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) Grant legislation will help small school districts in rural Wisconsin communities start, expand, and maintain STEM education programs. These education programs help to shape students’ interests and prepare them to pursue the high wage, high demand careers that are involved in advance manufacturing that can be found in rural areas.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on and express our support for the Rural Wisconsin Initiative. We encourage the Committee to act on these bills so that they might become law and more can be done to help rural areas and the health care providers that serve these areas of Wisconsin.