

Legal deserts threaten justice for all in rural America

August 3, 2020

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There are 1.3 million lawyers in the United States, but they are mostly concentrated in cities, while many small towns and rural counties have few lawyers. Despite efforts in some states to entice young lawyers to rural settings, the scarcity of rural attorneys is unlikely to change in the next decade, experts agreed.



“Nearly every state in the nation has large stretches of rural areas and counties with few lawyers in them,” said ABA President Judy-Perry Martinez.

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The numbers come from the newly released [2020 ABA Profile of the Legal Profession](#). The second annual report is a compilation of statistics and trends in several categories, including maps and charts showing every U.S. county – where lawyers are abundant and where they are lacking.

On July 28, three experts in rural justice joined ABA President Judy Perry Martinez to discuss the problems caused by the lack of lawyers in many rural areas nationwide and what is being done about it. The program, titled [“Legal Deserts in America: A Threat to Justice for All,”](#) was sponsored by the ABA Media Relations and Strategic Communications Division.

“Nearly every state in the nation has large stretches of rural areas and counties with few lawyers in them – or no lawyers at all,” Martinez said. “In fact, rural residents are disproportionately poor, and many are forced to travel long distances to find lawyers to handle routine matters that affect their everyday lives, such as wills, divorces and minor criminal and civil cases.”



South Dakota was one of the first states to tackle the problem, in 2012. Project Rural Practice combines funding from the state, rural counties and local bars to support young lawyers in small towns and farm counties. The results are “legal oases,” said Patrick Goetzinger, former president of the South Dakota State Bar who helped create the program.

In California, despite huge clusters of lawyers in Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego, there are also large swaths of legal deserts in rural areas, said Lisa Pruitt, a law professor at the University of California-Davis. “Unfortunately, in California, we don’t have any programs like” Project Rural Practice, Pruitt said, adding she is pessimistic about seeing many improvements in the next 10 years.

In Georgia, the 154 counties outside of metro Atlanta have 65% of the state’s population but only 30% of the state’s lawyers, said Lauren Sudeall, a law professor at Georgia State University. She, too, was not optimistic about seeing many improvements in the numbers by 2030. “But I hope that we can have a broader understanding of what access to justice means... Not just by looking at justice as sort of this binary do-you-have-a-lawyer-or-not question.”

Related links:

- Watch video of the program [“Legal Deserts in America: A Threat to Justice For All”](#)
- [2020 ABA Profile of the Legal Profession](#)
- ABA Journal: [“No Country for Rural Lawyers: Small-town attorneys still find it hard to thrive”](#)
- ABA Journal: [“What this law prof has learned about rural justice”](#)
- [“Legal Deserts: A Multi-State Perspective on Rural Access to Justice,”](#) Harvard Law & Policy Review, 2018
- Legal Services Corporation: [Access to Justice in Rural Areas](#)

