



Preparing Tomorrow's Rural Lawyers: Student Success and Community Impact

September 16, 2026



Executive Summary

Law schools play a pivotal role in addressing the rural access-to-justice crisis by developing innovative pathways to recruit, educate, support, and retain future rural lawyers. During this webinar, leaders from Association of American Law Schools (AALS) and LSAC member schools highlighted the significant progress already underway and emphasized that rural access to justice is not just a legal issue, but a broader community challenge requiring coordinated action across education, courts, bar associations, legislatures, employers, and local communities.

In this webinar, panelists described a growing portfolio of solutions being developed by law schools, including rural-focused clinics, externships, pipeline programs, online legal education, mentorship networks, financial incentives, technology-enabled legal services, and partnerships with community stakeholders. While substantial momentum exists, speakers stressed that no single institution is able to solve the problem alone. Success will depend on sustained collaboration, targeted investment, community-informed program design, and long-term support systems that help new lawyers establish successful careers in rural communities.

The webinar reinforced a central message: rural communities are not the problem. The challenge is to ensure equitable access to legal services and legal professionals for members of those communities. By working together across sectors and tailoring solutions to local needs, law schools and their partners can strengthen the rural legal workforce and improve access to justice.

10 Key Takeaways

- ✓ **Law schools are already engaged in rural access-to-justice efforts.** While emphasizing the continued need for rural access work by law schools, speakers emphasized that addressing legal deserts in rural communities is not a new initiative. Institutions across the country have spent years developing programs focused on expanding legal services and preparing students for rural practice.
- ✓ **Rural access to justice requires collective action.** No single organization can solve the problem. Effective solutions require collaboration among law schools, courts, bar associations, legislatures, tribal communities, employers, foundations, and local leaders.
- ✓ **Law schools are pursuing multiple strategies simultaneously.** Current efforts include clinical education, pro bono outreach, externships, pipeline programs, financial assistance, rural incubators, technology solutions, and regulatory innovation.

- ✓ **Students from rural backgrounds are critical to addressing rural access.** Programs such as the University of Nebraska's Rural Law Opportunities Program focus on recruiting rural students because they are among the most likely to return and practice in rural communities after graduation.
- ✓ **Experiential learning creates stronger connections to rural practice.** Clinics, externships, and summer placements enable students to live and work in rural communities, gain practical experience, and develop relationships that often influence future career choices.
- ✓ **Clinical programs are a powerful access-to-justice tool.** Rural clinics simultaneously serve underserved populations while giving students hands-on legal training. They provide a pathway for graduate employment and expand legal assistance in underserved regions.
- ✓ **Partnerships are essential at every stage of the pipeline.** Successful programs depend on partnerships with undergraduate institutions, courts, state and local bar associations, community organizations, and employers both before and after law school.
- ✓ **Financial barriers remain one of the biggest challenges.** Lower earning potential in some rural practices, student debt obligations, and start-up costs can discourage graduates from pursuing rural careers. Loan forgiveness, stipends, fellowships, and tuition-for-service programs were highlighted as promising solutions.
- ✓ **Retention depends on community integration, not just employment opportunities.** Panelists emphasized that retaining lawyers requires more than providing jobs. New attorneys need meaningful connections to local organizations, social networks, civic institutions, and community life so they can thrive both professionally and personally.
- ✓ **There is no one-size-fits-all solution.** Rural communities vary significantly across states and regions. Successful programs must be designed with local input, address local needs, and be developed in partnership with the communities they intend to serve.

Looking Ahead

The webinar highlighted growing momentum among law schools and their partners to address rural access-to-justice challenges. Innovative programs are emerging nationwide, and early successes demonstrate that meaningful progress is possible. However, panelists consistently stressed that lasting impact requires continued investment, stronger partnerships, scalable mentoring models, and community-centered solutions. As stakeholders convene in Nebraska in November and continue this national conversation, the focus will shift from identifying the problem to accelerating and expanding proven approaches that strengthen the rural legal workforce and increase access to justice.

Resources

Law schools across the United States and Canada are working on numerous initiatives addressing rural access to justice. Some of the programs mentioned in the webinar are found below.

- [Indiana University Maurer School of Law Applied Research Practicum](#)
- [Maine Law Rural Practice Clinic](#)
- [Mississippi Judiciary's Law Camps](#)
- [Nebraska State Bar Association Rural Practice Initiative](#)
- [Northwest Ohio Rural Access Initiative](#)
- [Scaling Justice Technology Partnerships](#)
- [Seattle University School of Law Hybrid Hubs](#)
- [The State Bar of South Dakota and the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law: Project Rural Practice](#)
- [University of Arkansas Bowen School of Law's Rural Practice Incubator Project](#)
- [The University at Buffalo School of Law Rural Justice Initiative](#)
- [University of Idaho College of Law Idaho Heritage Project](#)
- [University of Nebraska College of Law Rural Law Opportunities Program](#)
- [University of New Mexico School of Law Judicial Externship Program](#)
- [Washburn University School of Law's LEAP Program](#)