WEBINAR KEY INSIGHTS

Closing the Justice Gap: Expanding Legal Services in Rural Communities

October 14, 2026



Executive Summary

Many rural communities face significant legal service gaps, including attorney shortages, aging legal workforces, and limited access to related services such as mental health counseling, mediation, and treatment programs. While recruiting more lawyers remains important, speakers noted that attorney-focused solutions alone will not close the rural access to justice gap. Promising approaches include community justice worker programs, technology-enabled service delivery, stronger mentoring networks, targeted pipeline initiatives, enhanced connection to mental health and other services, and investments in existing rural legal professionals.

During this webinar, leaders from legal aid organizations, courts, justice foundations, and academia explored innovative approaches to addressing the rural access to justice crisis. Speakers emphasized that rural communities should not be viewed solely through the lens of scarcity or challenge. Instead, they highlighted the strengths of rural communities, including strong social networks, creativity, resilience, and a deep commitment to helping neighbors. Panelists repeatedly stressed that effective solutions begin by listening to communities themselves and recognizing that rural residents are often best positioned to identify their own legal and justice needs.

A consistent theme throughout the webinar was the need for cross-sector collaboration and better data. Courts, bar associations, law schools, legal aid organizations, community groups, policymakers, and funders all have a role to play in expanding access to justice. Panelists called for continued investment in evidence-based programs, sustainable funding models, and community-driven solutions that reflect local needs. Looking ahead, participants expressed optimism that a broader legal service ecosystem, combining lawyers, community-based legal helpers, technology, mentorship, and strong local partnerships, can significantly improve access to justice for rural communities over the next decade.

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10 Key Takeaways

- ✓ **There is no single "rural America."** Rural communities vary widely in demographics, economies, geography, and legal needs. Solutions that work in one community may not work in another, reinforcing the importance of localized strategies.
- ✓ **Rural communities possess significant strengths that are often overlooked.** Speakers warned against deficit-based narratives about rural communities, highlighting their strong sense of community, willingness to help neighbors, creativity in solving problems, and capacity to mobilize around shared challenges. These strengths make rural communities important partners in designing solutions.
- ✓ **Rural communities know their own needs and should help shape solutions.** Panelists repeatedly emphasized that effective access to justice efforts begin by listening to rural residents. Communities often have a clear understanding of their legal and service needs, and programs are most successful when they are developed with local input rather than imposed from outside.
- ✓ **Rural legal deserts extend beyond attorney shortages.** The justice gap includes shortages of prosecutors, defense counsel, mediators, mental health providers, substance-use treatment professionals, family counselors, and other support services that help legal systems function effectively.
- ✓ **Technology can help bridge gaps, but it is not a complete solution.** Examples such as telehealth-based mental health evaluations demonstrated how technology can reduce geographic barriers and improve efficiency. However, speakers cautioned that technology should complement, not replace, local relationships and community-based services. Trust, empathy, and community connection are viewed as important aspects of effective legal service delivery.
- ✓ **Community justice worker models show significant promise.** Several panelists highlighted the growing movement to train trusted community members to provide limited legal assistance and navigation support. These models expand access to help while leveraging individuals who already have strong community ties.
- ✓ **Data is essential for driving policy change.** Successful initiatives often begin with detailed data on attorney shortages, demographic trends, service gaps, and community needs. Data helps stakeholders identify priorities, make the case for funding, and design targeted interventions.
- ✓ **Recruitment alone will not solve the rural access –to justice crisis.** While attracting new lawyers remains important, panelists emphasized that broader solutions are needed, including supporting existing attorneys, expanding non-lawyer legal assistance models, strengthening mentorship, and investing in local talent.
- ✓ **Supporting existing rural legal professionals is just as important as recruiting new ones.** Programs that provide training, peer networks, professional development, and communities of practice can reinvigorate attorneys already serving rural populations and reduce burnout, especially in emotionally demanding areas such as child welfare and juvenile justice.
- ✓ **Solving the rural justice crisis requires an ecosystem approach.** The most successful long-term solutions will involve courts, law schools, legal aid organizations, bar associations, community groups, policymakers, funders, educators, and local leaders working together. Expanding access to justice requires strengthening the entire legal ecosystem rather than focusing on any single intervention.

Looking Ahead

Panelists envisioned a future in which every rural community has meaningful access to legal help, whether through lawyers, community justice workers, technology-enabled services, or other trusted local providers. Success will depend on continued collaboration, stronger mentoring networks, better data, sustainable funding, and greater recognition of the assets that already exist within rural communities. The discussion demonstrated a growing consensus that rural access to justice will be advanced not by a single solution, but by a coordinated portfolio of community-centered approaches that expand both the availability of legal services and the capacity of rural communities to sustain them over time.

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Resources

- **ABF: Alaska's community justice workers**
- **ABF: Delaware's Qualified Tenant Advocates**
- **Frontline Justice**
- **LSAC Rural Access to Justice**
- **LSC 2022 Justice Gap Report**
- **Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center**

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