Closing the Justice Gap: Expanding Legal Services in Rural Communities

[Transcript]

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Rural Access Initiative Webinar Series, Closing the Justice Gap: Expanding Legal Services in Rural Communities. Moderator: Verna Williams, CEO, Equal Justice Works. Speakers: Hannah Haksgaard, University of South Dakota, Knudson School of Law; Chief Justice Stephen R. Jensen, South Dakota Supreme Court; Nikole Nelson, CEO, Frontline Justice; Robby Southers, Policy and Justice Initiatives Council, Ohio Access to Justice Foundation; Michelle Paxton, Assistant Professor of Law, University of Nebraska College of Law, Director & Founder, Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center. Recorded October 14, 2026.

[Sudha Setty] Hello, and thank you for joining us here today for this webinar. I am Sudha Setty and I am the president and CEO of the Law School Admission Council. We are so pleased to be collaborating with the Association of American Law Schools on this Rural Access to Justice initiative, working with chief justices, tribal courts, law schools, bar associations, and many other groups and individuals. LSAC is committed to expanding access to justice across all communities. Rural communities we know face unique challenges, so our goal is to bring together many of the players who have been working on various aspects of this problem to create collaborative, cross-functional, and concrete solutions for the long term. Today is the third of three webinars that we've hosted this fall designed to provide a foundation for rural access efforts in the months and years ahead, drawing on so much of what work has been going on for decades in various places. Our first webinar in August focused on expanding pathways to law schools for rural communities. The second webinar in September highlighted the many ways in which law schools are already working to prepare students for rural practice.

We have summaries for both of these webinars on our website along with links to watch them on demand, and we've put those links in the chat here today. And today, we're excited to focus on innovative ways to provide legal services in rural areas, featuring a number of great organizations that are doing that work right now. They'll be talking about innovative approaches to strengthening the rural legal workforce, modernizing service delivery, and expanding access to justice through policy, regulatory, and community-based solutions. We've got a great panel of speakers today, and I am excited to learn more. A summary and on-demand video of today's event will be available on our website within a few days, so you can share it with the people who are not able to attend. And with that, I'm excited to turn it over to Verna Williams, the CEO of Equal Justice Works who will be leading today's discussion. Verna is a terrific leader at Equal Justice Works, an organization that we are proud to collaborate with given their vital role in promoting public service and helping ensure access to justice in communities all across the nation, rural, urban, and everything in between. Over to you, Verna.

[Verna Williams] Thank you so much, Sudha. It's really my pleasure to be here with you today, and thanks to everybody for joining us today. It's my honor to moderate this panel. Rural access to justice is an urgent challenge, and it's a significant opportunity for change in our legal system. Today's speakers confront rural access to justice on the ground, and as a result, they've got a diverse perspective on the issue from the vantage point of legal education, the judiciary, public policy, and service innovation. That means that the discussion that follows is going to be rooted in understanding the many dimensions of the rural access to justice crisis, and importantly, focused on working across sectors, engaging new people, and empowering communities to address it. So to that end, as you listen to our panelists today, I invite you to keep an ear open for ideas that you can take back to your own institutions and communities. And with that, let's go ahead and get started. My first question for the panelists is probably the easiest one for the afternoon or today. It's a lightning round. I invite each of you to share your name and organization, your current role, and one thing that's giving you hope about rural access to justice. And Professor Paxton, I see you first, so why don't I ask you to go first?

[Michelle Paxton] Well, thank you. Thank you so much to LSAC and Equal Justice Works for gathering today for this conversation. So I'm an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska College of Law and founded and director of Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center, where we're working diligently to ensure that every child, youth, and parent that intersect in the child maltreatment or juvenile justice system have access to high-quality counsel regardless of geography. And so what gives me hope is seeing opportunities like this where this conversation is continuing to have dialogue, but I see it every day in the attorneys I work with across rural Nebraska who have renewed commitment to their work because of supporting organizations that are investing in them.

[Verna] Thank you so much. How about Robby Southers from Ohio?

[Robby Southers] Sure. Thank you. Thank you all for having me today. My name's Robby Southers. I'm the Policy and Justice Initiatives Counsel at the Ohio Access to Justice Foundation, where we fund civil legal services in Ohio, as well as advocate for new justice initiatives around the state. What gives me the most hope in this area is the passion and excitement that I see in law students and other young people who are considering different paths than the traditional staying in the big city where they went to law school. It's just really nice seeing young people interested in this topic.

[Verna] Fantastic. Thank you so much, Robby. Turning next to Nikole, Nikole Nelson.

[Nikole Nelson] Great. Thanks, Verna. I'm Nikole Nelson and I'm the CEO of Frontline Justice. We are a national initiative that's empowering a new category of legal helper, the community justice worker, to help address our nation's access to justice crisis. And I came to this work after spending 25 years in the field in Anchorage, Alaska as a legal aid lawyer and also as the longtime executive director. And so serving rural communities is very near and dear to my heart. And what gives me hope at this moment in time is really when we expand beyond thinking of lawyer-only solutions, it looks like the evidence is beginning to develop that we really can find different ways of resolving the access to justice crisis that our nation faces in our rural communities through other means, and I'm excited about that.

[Verna] Terrific. Thank you so much. Justice Jensen?

[Steven Jensen] Yes, thank you. I'd like to tell you that I'm illustrating the justice gap with my camera problem, [Verna laughs] but I think it's just a technology issue. My name is Steve Jensen. I'm Chief Justice of the South Dakota Supreme Court. One of the things that gives me optimism and hope for rural areas is a sense of community and really the desire of neighbors to help one another, to get involved and to assist. And I think that that goes a long ways in our rural communities to people that want to make a difference in others' lives and assist them.

[Verna] Terrific. Thank you so much. And thank you for illustrating the problem. It's always helpful to have a visual. [chuckles] Okay, and last but not least, Professor Ha—. Please tell me how to pronounce your last name.

[Hannah Haksgaard] Haksgaard, yes. Yep, my name's Hannah Haksgaard. I'm a professor at the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law. I feel very lucky to be a law professor who has time to research and write about rural lawyers. I have quite a bit of things that give me hope, but I will say that one thing that I think is true is that we've learned that rural communities are willing to invest their money and their other resources into recruiting and retaining lawyers and other aspects of the justice system. So I think we have very strong partners with rural communities.

[Verna] Terrific. All right, well, so we are off to a fantastic start. Lots of great feelings of hope, and I'm going to build on that. So the first question is for everyone. "We often hear about rural communities through the lens of challenge, but I'd like to start with strengths. What do you wish people understood better about rural communities and their capacities to drive solutions?" And feel free to just jump in as you feel moved. [Hannah] I'll go first to follow up on my prior comment. And I think one of the strengths is that rural people know that they need to be very active in order to keep their communities alive. And because they have this mindset and they're very cognizant that constant community building is needed, they're surprisingly adept at mobilizing to get things done, which again brings me back to the, I think we have strong partners in rural communities and that's one of their strengths.

[Verna] Thank you.

[Nicole] Hannah, I really agree with that. And I would say that one of the strengths that I see repeatedly in rural communities is unlimited creativity and really this willingness to figure out how you get the job done, even if you may not have the resource that everyone else is telling you is most important for the thing that you're trying to accomplish. So creativity is in abundance.

[Verna] Other thoughts?

[Michelle] I'll jump in and say I agree with both of those wholeheartedly. And I would also emphasize that I'm struck by the power of positive relationships that I see with individuals working in rural communities and that commitment of support to each other and lifting each other up, especially when it comes to advocacy.

[Verna] Terrific.

[Robby] Yeah, I would agree with everything everyone said. We've seen in our work just the power of community that exists in rural communities where if we need to get support for a young attorney that's going to an area, someone down the street knows someone else who then can get them what they need. There's a lot of just neighbors helping neighbors that is not necessarily seen in larger areas.

[Steven] Yeah, and I would just follow up echoing all those comments. I think they're spot on in terms of the willingness of people to help others in rural communities, and it's encouraging to see.

[Verna] All right. Well, we are off on a really good foot here. Hannah, next question is for you. "Based on your research and work with rural communities, what do rural residents tell us that they need from the legal profession that we may not be hearing often enough?"

[Hannah] Yeah, so I'll start with the old adage that when you've seen one rural place, you've seen one rural place. And I'll modify that slightly for this question just to say of when you figured out what one rural population needs, you still only figured out what one rural population needs. In other words, it is very hard to answer this question broadly because there are going to be very different needs in rural areas. But one thing I do think that we've learned is that rural communities do tend to know what they need and we need to listen to what they say, right? I don't know if I can emphasize that enough of sort of like we've talked already about the strengths of those rural communities and actually engaging with them and listening to them is very important.

But let me share a couple of kind of broad thoughts to answer this question. So generally people in rural communities do like to have their services local. They would prefer to bring their legal needs to someone in the community. Now, there are certain times that local clients want to take private issues to larger cities so the client isn't seen going into and out of a lawyer's office for fear it might create gossip around town, but generally we hear that they want local lawyers. And the thing about having local lawyers is they want those lawyers to live and work locally, allowing them to truly be embedded into the local community. Now, sometimes you hear this because local communities want tax dollars to stay local, so it's really like we want business to stay local. But more often you hear it less of a tax perspective and more of a hearing it that people in rural communities want someone who can understand them and can understand their needs. They want someone who acts with empathy towards the needs of the rural community and with empathy towards the individual clients. And because they want local lawyers, they want to recruit lawyers and other professionals to their communities who are going to end up staying there in that community long term.

Now I would say here that when we talk about what communities need, there's a lot of focus on clients who cannot afford lawyers. And rightfully so, right, because a large portion of rural America lives in poverty and cannot afford lawyers. But I also want to emphasize that there's plenty of rural Americans who are willing and quite frankly wanting to pay for solid legal services in their communities. And I think that this point is important because it is one of the reasons that technology is not our best and only answer, right? People are willing to pay for legal services and they want those legal services local. Now, one final comment I'm going to make here to sort of wrap up this kind of overview is from a book chapter that I wrote a number of years ago now. And the idea there is that legal needs in many ways look like a supply chain. And if I think about it as supply chains, we have massive supply chain issues. In fact, I think you can think about this as looking at looking like two converging supply chains. So one supply chain would be bringing people to lawyers or other legal professionals.

So people who have legal issues may not even realize the life problems they're going through are even legal issues. They may not know they need to go to a lawyer. So we

need to have trusted individuals in communities who are trained enough to say, "A lawyer can help with that and let me make you a referral." So that's one supply chain issue. The other supply chain issue is bringing lawyers into rural communities to then serve those legal needs. I will resist the urge to talk about that topic for the next hour since we're going to hear lots more about it, but I think it's fair to say that we have supply chain issues in both directions and we can work to improve both. So kind of to sum that up, rural communities are all different. They're unique places, we need to center community voices, and we need to have empathy for the individual people in those communities.

[Verna] Fantastic. Thank you so much, so clear. And I'd have to say it's not unique to rural communities, right? It's the kind of thing that we've been learning all along that communities are different. They have ideas about what help they need and we need to take our cues from them. Thank you so much, Hannah. Chief Justice Jensen, next question is for you. "From the judiciary's perspective, where do you see the consequences of the justice gap most clearly?"

[Steven] Yeah, let me talk about two specific issues that are out there. We're all familiar with the lawyer affordability issues and the ability of individuals to hire counsel, but we have issues in South Dakota, I know other states have similar issues, for court appointments. We just simply don't have lawyers to appoint. So for instance, we have a number of counties. There are no lawyers in the counties, not one lawyer. We have some counties where there's maybe one lawyer. We have an example of there are four counties in South Dakota, in the northwest part of the state that share one state's attorney because there are no lawyers in those counties. And so when you have, particularly in cases, so you've got to find defense counsel, and also in abuse and neglect cases, which is really problematic because you need an attorney for mom, attorney for dad, sometimes more than one child or multiple parents. And so you may sometimes need four or five lawyers. You might be talking about having lawyers to drive 2,300 miles to get to the courtroom. And it's a burden, a burden on the lawyer, it's a burden on the cost of transportation and expense there. And sometimes judges just have a really, really difficult time finding lawyers, particularly in higher level felonies, experienced counsel that are able to try a serious felony case in a criminal case. So that's one issue I would highlight that I think is unique to rural areas.

The second is lack of services. And this is both in the criminal and the civil context. You think about in the criminal context, most criminal involvement involve drug and alcohol abuse, lack of drug and alcohol services available. Sometimes individuals will have to drive 30, 40, 50 miles to find a counseling center. Same way with mental health counseling. On the civil side, family mediators, family counselors, the lack of those services in rural communities really make it difficult on the court system to be able to say, "Okay, we want to bring this family together, we want to try to work things out. Let's

see if we can co-parent." We don't have anybody that can help those parents do that. And so that's a real gap in rural areas is a lack of services. So those are two in particular I would highlight.

[Verna] Those are absolutely crushing, heartbreaking. "What do you wish policymakers or legal leaders or the public better understood about the experience of a rural resident trying to navigate that kind of system?"

[Steven] Yeah, we talk about simple things like driver's licenses, and whether it be, you know, taking driver's licenses when fines aren't paid, whether it's the ability to get license revocation and alcohol or drug offenses. And so now we've set this person up for failure because they've got to drive 40 miles to a treatment facility for outpatient treatment. They don't have a license, they got to find someone to take them. And so just to understand the logistics and navigating that for individuals and really how behind and how far we set them back through policies that are well intended, but we need to think about how we can better improve that gap for individuals in rural areas that really have to navigate the system. One example I would give you of a positive in South Dakota is a couple of years ago, mental health commitments. We have some places in South Dakota when a law enforcement, there's a mental health crisis, they need to take somebody in for an evaluation. They would sometimes have to drive 3 or 400 miles to do that in some parts of the state. And we were able to set up an arrangement with one of our healthcare providers, 24-hour access by iPad. And so now law enforcement, rather than driving hundreds of miles, can hop on an iPad and sometimes they don't really need treatment, but the officers aren't in a position to make that recommendation.

And so this really has saved a lot of driving and a lot of, and has helped individuals to figure out is this person need to be committed immediately or is this someone that we can leave out in the community safe? And so I guess I would highlight that as one thing that has really benefited families in rural communities.

[Verna] Thank you, Chief. This gives us a great segue to the next question. You're bringing up of the innovation, and the question is for Nikole. "Frontline Justice has helped advance innovative approaches to meeting legal needs. How do we ensure that innovation remains centered on trust, relationships, and the lived experiences of community members?"

[Nikole] Okay, well, thanks for that question, Verna. And I mean, maybe I should start by explaining what Frontline Justice really is advocating for. That is, again, as I explained before, I came to this work after spending 25 years as a legal aid lawyer trying and failing to address all of the needs of my community, the community that I was living in. And part of that work was trying to, again, recruit lawyers to go and serve rural communities, remote communities that were, by all accounts, extremely remote. So much of Alaska, about 90% of Alaska communities are off the road system. And so for

the length of time that I worked at ALSC, Alaska Legal Services, I would try to recruit lawyers to come to these remote spaces and to serve the community. And oftentimes, folks would come for a couple of years and then they would leave. And during that time, also, they didn't really know the communities very well that they were trying to serve. It took some time to really understand what it's like to live there, to be there, to the lack of services that might be available, and also to understand what assets were available within the community and who the right relationships were.

And so fast-forward, our community came together under the leadership of our Supreme Court who really decided that if we are going to get on top of this access to justice crisis, particularly in our rural communities, we need to stop thinking of it from a lawyer perspective. What we really need to start considering is taking the needs of the communities that we are hoping to serve into account and starting there as you're thinking about solutions to these problems. And so as part of that sort of flipping the switch from what do lawyers need to succeed in remote places, we thought, how could we design a delivery of legal services in such a way that they were designed to meet the community needs? And that led us to thinking about how we might grow our own legal advocates, community justice workers, folks who were already in the community upskilling them to provide some legal help on issues that people were facing, everyday legal problems that people were facing that were impacting their health, and their health, their family stability, their food security, and that they could not get legal help on.

And so as part of this, we were fortunate enough to really be able to look at some other models. The healthcare system in Alaska had already developed, had 40-year history of training and upskilling healthcare workers to provide limited scope medical help. And we thought, "Why can't we do this in the justice space?" And so within pretty short order, we had been able to develop a program that trained over 200 community justice workers, folks that are in 42 communities that were off the road system who were then directly providing for the legal needs of the communities they were serving. So circling back to the question you asked, how do we assure that we have whatever innovations we're thinking about are tied to the communities that we're serving? The way that we do that is by thinking about their needs first instead of how we as practitioners, as lawyers, what we might need to succeed. We should really be thinking about how we flip that switch and think about what those communities need to achieve justice and start there first.

[Verna] Great. Let me ask you this question. What innovations are you seeing that have the most promise?

[Nikole] Yeah, so I'm going to stick with the community justice worker model. It goes by—

[Verna] What a surprise.

[Nikole] Yeah, shockingly. [chuckles] But we're having such a moment right now. Over the last two years, I came to this national organization to lead Frontline Justice about two years ago. And since that time, we've had an explosion, I would say, of movement and momentum around this idea that we could train folks who aren't lawyers to be able to help people with their unmet legal needs. And currently there are 14 states plus the District of Columbia that have either adopted, formally adopted policies that would allow for community justice workers to exist, or I have officially proposed those. And these jurisdictions range from DC to Montana and across the board. Texas and California are in the mix too with proposals pending. So again, I think this is one area where we can really think about providing some good help to people, and it also helps, again, upskill people who are already in the communities. They know them as well as they should, these communities, and know what justice might feel like more so than somebody who is newer to the community and hasn't had the experience of living there for any length of time.

[Verna] That's great. And you don't have to worry about the issue of them going away. Retention seems to be not an issue, I would imagine.

[Nikole] I think it's less so if you're committed to the community and serving [indistinct] already there.

[Verna] Okay.

[Nikole] Yeah. All right. Thank you. Robby, you're up next. "Where do you see the greatest opportunity for collaboration among courts, bar associations, community organizations, legal aid providers, and law schools?"

[Robby] Sure, so I can talk a little bit about the collaboration we've done in Ohio because I think it's led to some really exciting initiatives. So our Supreme Court formulated a rural practice alliance that consisted of the Supreme Court, the Ohio Access Justice Foundation, our state bar, our statewide legal assistance website, along with some other important stakeholders. And what that did is, first, it allowed us to really bring a lot of important data together in one place so we could make really informed decisions about where we wanted to go next. And some of the things we found with that data was, one, that 57 of Ohio's 88 counties had less than one attorney for every 1,500 residents, and that in some counties, the average age of that attorney was in the mid 70s, if not older, which really led us to decide that our next step needed to be nurturing a better pipeline from law school to practice. There's a lot of ways we could have gone, but given those numbers and especially that age data, we really wanted to start with that idea of fostering rural practice in Ohio's law schools.

Ohio's fortunate to have a lot of law schools which really helps to build a pipeline for us. So we started with two initiatives there that really were only possible because of the

broad collaboration we did among stakeholders. The first one is, in talking to law students and getting their feedback, we found that there were students that were interested in rural practice but didn't feel like they had a support system or peers or anyone to talk to really explore that option. So while they might think about it, while they might say, "Yeah, I'd love to go back to my small town or go to some other community and practice," it's not what's talked about in law school. It's not talked about as going to the big firm downtown, so I really don't know what to expect with it.

So we've started building in some of our law schools law school affinity groups where students that are interested in rural practice can get together, talk to each other, support each other. And then they can also bring in practitioners that are practicing in rural areas to come talk to those groups. And that's really helped to get students to start thinking more about rural practice, one, if they were already thinking about it, but also it gets the conversation started for students that may not have thought about it.

One fun example that I'm really excited about with these affinity groups is at Ohio State, the student said, "We just want to do some fun event that will get people out, get people to start talking about rural practice." And the students chose that they wanted to have a petting zoo on the law school lawn. So we brought a petting zoo out, we brought some cows and goats. And while that might be a little stereotypical on the nose that we expected for rural practice, it got over a hundred students at Moritz talking about whether they actually wanted to go into rural practice. So not something we would've expected, but bringing those partners together helped us to have that as a great event. We're doing it again this year to get students talking about it again.

The other exciting initiative that this partnership brought out is we launched a rural practice incentive program in Ohio. And what that does is if a young attorney is entering into practice in one of those 57 counties, they can qualify for up to $10,000 in loan repayment assistance each year for at least three years as a way to help defray the costs and encourage students to think about rural practice. I hope that we continue our alliance moving forward because that partnership has helped in all of these ways. But really that data we collected and then having all those partner voices really helped those two first initiatives to get off the ground and really show some great first success.

[Verna] That is really exciting, Robby. I have to say, I mentioned Ohio—when I introduced you because I used to be the dean at University of Cincinnati College of Law. So I'm very familiar with the issues around interesting students to do this work and how difficult it is. So my hats off to this collaboration of coming up with really unique ideas to get them thinking outside of the box. Thank you so much. If the state wanted to accelerate progress in this area, what would be the first step that you'd recommend? I think our data collection was such an important part of it because it's really hard to argue against a policy when you can say, "Hey, here's this county in Southeastern Ohio where the average attorney's age is 76 years old." It's really hard to argue against that

point that there's some kind of need there, not only now, but obviously in 10 years from now that need's going to be greater even. It's hard to argue against making a policy when that's kind of the reality we're facing.

[Verna] Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Robby. All right, turning next to you, Michelle. "Your work is at the intersection of children's justice, legal education, and community engagement. How does the rural justice gap uniquely affect children and families?"

[Michelle] Absolutely, and thank you again. And thanks to Chief Justice Jensen, by the way, you are not alone in the statements he provided about South Dakota. The same thing is happening with your neighbor here in Nebraska. And similar to Ohio, we have similar statistics of 12 counties with zero attorneys, 21 counties with three or fewer. And as Chief Justice Jensen said that the impact when you have cases involving abuse or neglect, they're compounded because the number of attorneys needed. It is not uncommon to have five attorneys needed in a case. And the reality is, is while a county may have zero attorneys, there are people that live in that county that intersect with our system. And so what happens to the children and families that are pulled in? Children are separated from their parents, and the child may be placed several hours away in a foster home. And multiple attorneys are appointed that are driving hours to that court hearing or having to drive hours to meet with their parent client or meet with their child. And so when you create this distance barrier in a family situation where there's already been significant trauma, people are not coming into the child maltreatment court because they've had the best day of their life, this is when they've experienced additional challenges.

And that's the other key change or area that impacts our families, especially in rural communities, is that traditional lawyering that we learn in law school of how to introduce evidence, examine a witness or logical thinking, all these wonderful things that we're working here at Nebraska to teach our students is essential in child maltreatment court. But there's a whole other area that is required as well from our attorneys, and that is understanding these complex circumstances that families are facing. Families entering dependency court have substance use histories, mental health issues, domestic violence may be being experienced in their family home, often challenged even further by poverty. And many of our law students haven't learned how that impacts families. Now, why is it different in rural communities? Because the same facts and challenges happen in our urban communities.

The reality is our lawyers are especially isolated and their access to additional supports and understanding how to manage those cases is much more limited. So they may not have received the training and knowledge and skills in that area, and they don't have that mentor to say, "How do I handle a case like this? I've never worked with a parent with such a mental health disorder or this terrible thing happened and I'm trying to help

a child work through it." Compounded by the fact that one of the most effective strategies in working with your clients in this area is building that relationship. But if your client is two, three hours away, there's a time issue that makes it even more challenging.

So our attorneys and the children and families living in these communities are further challenged to achieve their ultimate goal of family reunification. And the courts play an essential part in helping families achieve that goal. But when they have so many barriers against them due to attorney availability and not only attorney availability but the quality of attorney because they have those additional knowledge and skills is just even, creates additional burden on those children and families to achieve the goals that they want to have of reunification.

[Verna] Wow. There's just so much there to unpack, Michelle. I mean, yeah, the point that especially resonated with me was the idea that the lawyers are isolated from other professionals.

[Michelle] Absolutely.

[Verna] As it is in legal education, we don't do the best job, I think, of educating our students about the other professionals that can help them do their jobs compared to let's say social work where they have practicums where they actually work with folks from different professions or they learn, "This is a problem I don't know how to answer. Let me call on this professional." So I can imagine that the stakes would be even higher and more dire in this context. Is there a particular story or experience that has shaped how you think about the importance of this work?

[Michelle] Absolutely, and I love that you asked that question because it gets to my own bias or ideas about what I thought we could do to create impact. And in my head I thought, "If we deliver the knowledge and skills attorneys need, that already live in our rural communities." My goal is not, yes, I want to recruit attorneys, but let's make the attorneys that live there feel supported and have the knowledge and skills. And so we did that and we see these increases in that, and that is one piece. But I didn't realize the other piece was this area of community that would be created from our fellowship cohorts that we created across Nebraska. So attorneys, when they come in together in community in other ways, they create that level of relationship. So you might have an attorney in Western Nebraska connecting with an attorney on Eastern Nebraska for those social supports, which ultimately, for me, increases their commitment. And we found that information and that data would be so revealing that I need our attorneys that are already in Nebraska, that are amazing attorneys, to continue to have a high commitment to this work. Especially when you're working with vulnerable populations, we see high areas of burnout and vicarious trauma. And so how do we help with that?

And so the program we've developed is attempting to address that, and in part, it's through that community of other attorneys. And I often have attorneys who join the program because someone like Chief Justice Jensen tells them, "Hey, why don't you do this program?" and so they do it. And then they'll tell me at the end, unprompted, "I wanted to quit working in juvenile court, or I didn't want to do this kind of work anymore, and now actually I love it."

[Verna] Wow.

[Michelle] "And I feel more committed." And so where we can see opportunities for programs to reignite those attorneys that are already working in those communities, to invigorate them, to build those relationships with mentors and peers across the state, I think that reinforces our workforce in a fantastic way.

[Verna] That is terrific, Michelle and resonates. This resonates for a completely different reason now, because at Equal Justice Works, one of the things that we do work on is building a community of practice for all of our fellows. So I might follow up with you on that. That's fascinating.

[Michelle] I'd love to talk more.

[Verna] Yeah, yeah. Terrific. Okay, this question is for everybody now, okay? This time, I'm going to ask you to travel in time and travel to the year 2031, which is five years from now. Hard to believe that that's only five years from now, but anyway, 2031, and we have made meaningful progress. What is different for people living in rural communities? How have we progressed in those five years?

[Hannah] Because I'm sure people have big-picture comments, I'm actually going to start with a very narrow comment, which is that if we can hone in on the very local scale and look at individual communities, that we will be able to identify a number of communities across the country that have new lawyers in them who are set up to have 30-year careers. And so, and I start with this narrow answer because like one rural lawyer I think really can make a difference in a rural community. And for every single lawyer that we place, lots of clients ultimately get served. That to me is a success at the local scale in that we should be celebrating each individual lawyer. And I'm looking forward to the big-picture answers everyone else gives, but I don't want us to lose sight that every victory is a victory that is an improvement.

[Verna] Love it. Every victory is a victory. Thank you, Hannah. Other thoughts?

[Nikole] Well, I'd love it if—

[Robby] Go ahead, Nikole. I'm sorry.

[Nikole] Absolutely, within the next five years, if legal help was available in every rural community so that we no longer have rural deserts, and that could be, again, when I think about this, I think about it as growing the legal ecosystem and making it broader and bigger than it currently is right now. So I agree, we need more lawyers in rural spaces that everyone is a victory, but we also could have these other legal helpers that help balance that out and make help that's accessible, available in every community and build that connective, building a infrastructure that would connect community justice workers and other legal helpers with lawyers in other communities. And just really thinking about how we could make help available in the places people already are going.

[Verna] Okay. Go the ecosystem.

[Robby] I'd agree with both Nikole and Hannah. I think it's a huge win every time we have a new attorney entering a practice area where maybe the average age of an attorney was 75 years old. But I'd also say that I don't think attorneys on their own are going to solve this problem. I'm hoping in the next five years we start to have conversations about systemic changes that mean that people may not need an attorney to solve their legal problem, or may be able to get right-sized help for what they need. So while the pipeline I think is a really important first step, I think there's a lot of work still to do.

[Steven] So I'm going to go back to services again. And I think, you know, I know there's some work being done on use of technology for remote services and counseling and treatment, things like that. I would really like to see some studies on the efficacy of those. And, you know, I think judges need to be confident that if that's the type of service, and in some areas we just don't have other options. Are those services effective? Are they working? Are they helping individuals? You know, mostly what we have now is anecdotal. You hear some good and you hear some bad. I think it would be really helpful to see some studies that, you know, which in five years we should be able to have. And maybe there's other things besides remote technology, but service delivery in rural areas is just absolutely crucial.

[Verna] All right. Great.

[Michelle] If I could add in if we have time for that.

[Verna] Please, yes.

[Michelle] I would say collecting quality data on what works and publicizing that data to stakeholders who can fund programs that are effective. All the programs that I have created here at Nebraska Law started with foundation funding, meaning I'm hustling through grants and writing these grants to get funded, and that's wonderful and it starts that idea. But for long-term success to happen where we really can move the needle on

change, there needs to be sustainable funding from federal and state levels. And so if we have the data to support it, we need to get to that, to the stakeholders who can provide continued funding that can allow these programs that I'm hearing about today across our nation to continue to flourish.

[Verna] Great. Thank you so much. All right, we have reached the lightning round. [chuckles] Yes. Hope you have your clickers in hand. In one sentence, what is the single biggest opportunity for advancing rural access to justice over the next five years?

[Steven] Young lawyers who really have a desire to make a difference.

[Verna] Okay, young lawyers. That's also a source of hope, if I remember correctly. Yes.

[Hannah] Convincing and leveraging existing lawyers to serve as mentors for new law school graduates as well as paralegals and any other legal professionals in rural communities.

[Robby] I'd say attention and focus on the issue to support those young lawyers and to support other changes that can lead to improvements.

[Nikole] So I'm going to say continuing collecting more data to support the efficacy of changes. And I will just mention that there's research from the American Bar Association that's come out on the efficacy of community justice workers showing that they have been effective, as effective as lawyers in the areas in their scope of practice, and including dragging down $23 million in SNAP benefits that otherwise would not have been distributed. So collect the evidence.

[Michelle] Ditto. [Verna Laughs] I want [indistinct] all of that, and continued partnerships with multiple stakeholders to drive positive outcomes for communities.

[Verna] Okay. Well done. Well, we have some time for questions. And let me go ahead and ask one of them to you. Ready? Here, "How do you engage with a rural community to learn more about what they need?" I believe we started out here saying it was important to listen to communities. They know what they need. And the question is, "Well, how?" Is there a common mechanism? Any particular recommendations that you have?

[Nikole] We did things a couple of different ways. So one was formal research where there were a number of surveys and connecting with stakeholders within the community and surveying them to figure out what assets were there. We also held focus groups just in rural communities asking people what are your biggest problems? And not asking them to identify what the legal problems were or speak to couch it in terms of legal problems, but simply what problems are you trying to solve? And then figuring out if

there was a legal solution on top of that. So I think there are many different ways of talking to people, but those are two ways that have been successful, I think.

[Hannah] I think there's also good inroads that can be made through sort of, those tend to be state associations of county commissioners. And so there's a kind of an ability to get into those non-legal organizations that connect with local municipalities in various ways that allows you to build those connections.

[Verna] That's great. Other thoughts?

[Robby] In addition to the data that we collected as a partnership, the foundation also runs our Ohio Justice Bus, which has given us an opportunity to drive into local communities, provide services, and find out firsthand from people that need the services what their challenges are. So it's not just that they have a legal challenge, but they might also have trouble accessing broadband internet or they might also have trouble with transportation. It's given us an opportunity to talk to people where they are while also giving them assistance.

[Verna] These are really great ideas.

[Steven] Yeah, I would add, I think engaging bar associations, bar leadership to be thinking about these issues. How can they get involved? How can they engage in this? Larger firms that maybe can provide, whether it's financial or otherwise solutions in some of these areas.

[Verna] Okay. All right, another question. "Do you work with lawmakers? And if so, how?" [chuckles]

[Michelle] Yes. How's that, Verna? [chuckles] Absolutely. Because I think if you're doing programmatic work and you think it has impact, one of the things I'm still learning is how to share that. It's, I like to work, right? Like I see a problem and I want to hustle towards that work and I have a really hard, I'll admit this, I have a hard time sharing it. My colleague tells me to post on LinkedIn, what are all the ways, right? And so part of that has been reflecting on how to be intentional about success in programs with our data and sharing them with state stakeholders, legislator that you, whoever it may be that is important in your region. And I think what I have found is, and even that gets to the other question, is talking to people about the concerns of their community, I've never had someone tell me no.

[Verna] Mm.

[Michelle] Or sharing what we're doing, here's a problem we see, this is what we're doing. And it doesn't mean I'm asking for money. I mean, I may be, but I'll take it if anyone wants to give it. But if it's sharing the stories of what I'm hearing from families or I'm hearing from attorneys and what the success is, I have found that our state senators

or leaders in government want to hear that because they're hearing many of the problems that exist. And if you're coming forward with a solution or a strategy to approach that is often a wonderful conversation.

[Verna] Terrific. I have another question if that's okay, unless anybody wanted to add on to what Michelle just said. If not, "What do you think prelaw advisors working with undergraduate students can do to help?"

[Robby] I've seen it's been important to get students thinking about rural practice as early as possible. Even before prelaw advisors, our court works with high schools to talk about the idea of coming back home and representing your neighbors when you finish law school. So I think prelaw advisors are important, but I don't think it's necessarily the first time people should hear this. We should even be going younger than that in a lot of places.

[Hannah] I agree with that, as I think one of our big challenges and one of the things we need to do is tell young, smart, rural kids that if they want to have a good livelihood and a good career in their home community, that law school gives them the ability to go out and get an education and come home. The earlier we can get that message out, the better. But having prelaw advisors in on that is very important.

[Verna] Yeah, and I'll just put a plug in as well as the other justice work that is available. Might be food for thought for them and particularly in right now in the 14 states that are allowing community justice workers, that might be something to put on their radar screen as well. Okay, "What inducements do you think rural communities can realistically offer to young lawyers to get them to move to their communities? And is it fair to expect communities to offer inducements?"

[Hannah] I think it's fair to have communities do it because they reap the benefits of having lawyers there recruiting, like getting taxes. I think easy ways is help with housing, help with office space, help the community be willing to actually bring their business, would be my short answer to that.

[Verna] Okay.

[Michelle] I'd like to add in mentorship. When I talk to law students, what I hear and what we're trying to also address is they're aware of the opportunities to work in rural communities, but they're scared. Who's going to mentor them? And yet when I talk to judges and experienced attorneys, they're like, "I would love to do that." And so part of it is I say, how do we build those relationships of mentorship? Because yes, the financial inducement can be a game changer, but if you don't have that community, that relationship, I think that also is a really important component too. So knowing if you have a mentor for at least the lawyers I'm talking to or law students, that seems to be a really important component.

[Verna] All right. Terrific.

[Nikole] Well, and may I add something here? Maybe one thing we could think about instead of thinking how we can entice people to come to rural communities is also think about how we could build pathways for the folks that are already there to help deliver these services. And my experience has been, and again, this is born out of trying for 25 years to recruit lawyers to rural spaces and not having a whole lot of luck with that, is thinking about how we might build support for those that are there and whether or not all types of the practice of law and all legal procedures require a seven-year advanced degree and for somebody to take on that depth.

[Verna] Is there anything that you recommend? Let me just sort of build on that point... [indistinct] I just blanked on your name. [chuckles] Nikole, is there anything that you did or would recommend that folks do in that regard to get people thinking about that are already there? And I have to wrap it up. I'm getting the hook.

[Nikole] Yeah, so what I would recommend for people to do is think about it. If you started a community justice worker program, in addition to serving the needs, it helps somebody test out whether or not maybe this is something they have capacity to do before they have to commit to the, you know, they committed to seven years and the debt that comes along with that, if this is something that they have the aptitude for doing. And at the same time, they're learning some skills and also serving their community.

[Verna] Okay, that's going to have to be the last word. This was such a great conversation. Thank you all so much. Please join me in thanking our panelists for sharing their insights. And many thanks to LSAC for inviting me to moderate this panel and to be part of it. And this has been spectacular. We've learned a lot of things, a lot of takeaways in terms of listening to the communities, recognizing communities as our partners, and recognizing the power of working collaboratively, because we know that going beyond our silos to cultivate strategies is the way to make change. So thank you so much. And with that, I believe this webinar is over.

[Announcer] Visit LSAC.org to learn more.

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