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(<https://molawyersmedia.com/category/news/>)**Events**
(/events/)**Opinions**
(/legal-
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Legal Deserts: Rural Missouri counties struggle with attorney shortages



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Legal Deserts: Rural Missouri counties struggle with attorney shortages

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(mailto:?subject=Legal Deserts: Rural Missouri counties struggle with attorney shortages&body=In dozens of rural Missouri counties, residents in need of legal help face a tough reality: 10 or fewer attorneys serve thousands of people, and some counties struggle even to... You can read the content in details following link <https%3A%2F%2Fmolawyersmedia.com%2F2024%2F12%2F11%2Flegal-deserts-rural-missouri-counties-struggle-with-attorney-shortages%2F>)

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- More than a third of Missouri counties have 10 or fewer attorneys, creating significant legal access challenges in rural areas.
- Rural legal deserts impact critical services like family law, domestic violence, and child welfare case representation.
- Technology and remote work have helped attorneys partially bridge the gap in rural legal service delivery.
- Law firms and bar associations are developing strategies to recruit and retain lawyers in rural Missouri communities.

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In dozens of rural Missouri counties, residents in need of legal help face a tough reality: 10 or fewer attorneys serve thousands of people, and some counties struggle even to maintain a prosecutor's office.

On paper, Missouri ranks among the national average for the average number of attorneys for 1,000 people, about four. However, Missouri Bar President Shelly Dreyer said the numbers don't tell the whole truth. The reality is that more than a third of Missouri's counties, 40 out of 114, have 10 licensed attorneys or less, according to Missouri Courts.

"Numbers don't answer the big picture because if those numbers are all concentrated in our metropolitan areas like they are in Missouri, you still have that access to justice issue," Dreyer said.

For example, Schuyler County in northeast Missouri, population 4,053, only has two attorneys in good standing per the Missouri Bar — and one of them, Lindsay Gravett, is also the county's prosecuting attorney.

Even if a county has an attorney — or two — that doesn't mean they specialize in what a client might need. Still, Dreyer said it is a complex issue beyond just looking at data.

"The Missouri Bar is looking at this issue; it's an ongoing issue; it's a very complex issue. You can't just look at the numbers ... Just because there are so few lawyers in those counties doesn't necessarily mean there's an access to justice issue (there)," she said. "Just anecdotally speaking to people in rural counties, they have seen and have concerns about citizens having access to attorneys."

The rural reality

Those who do not have access to an attorney in their community may have to travel long distances to find representation, and vice versa: attorneys have to travel long distances to work with their clients. That travel often results in added costs for clients, not to mention the time spent traveling takes away from other business an attorney might need to get done.



Shelly Dreyer

It's an issue Dreyer is familiar with, having her own practice based in Joplin. While Joplin itself may not be considered rural, it is surrounded by rural counties where she has had to practice.

"It is different than practicing in the city. You get a lot more windshield time ... It's one thing when you're in the city, and you have several dockets in courtrooms. You just pop downstairs or what have you, but when you have court in several counties, it obviously makes it a lot more challenging to get all of that covered," she said.

The consequences of these legal deserts extend beyond inconvenience. According to the American Bar Association, as of 2020, 40 percent of U.S. counties had fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents, with many having no attorneys. The impact is particularly severe in cases involving family law, domestic violence and child welfare — areas where prompt legal assistance can be crucial.

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The problem compounds itself: Rural communities often face higher poverty rates yet have fewer resources to address legal needs. Organizations like Legal Aid of Western Missouri try to fill these gaps, serving a 40-county area where nearly 300,000 people live in poverty. With offices in Kansas City, Joplin, St. Joseph and Warrensburg, they provide free civil legal assistance. Similar organizations, such as Mid-Missouri Legal Services and Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, serve similar residents in those areas.

Adaptions and partnerships

However, serving rural communities has become a point of pride and innovation for some attorneys. The Blanton, Nickell, Collins, Douglas, Hanschen & Peters law firm in Sikeston has clients from the range of “a congressional district,” according to attorney Joseph Blanton. Sikeston is in the 8th Congressional District, which covers rural southeast and south-central Missouri and some counties in the southwest, stretching from the Bootheel to Festus, Hillsboro and the surrounding Lead Belt area. Its western boundary is near Branson.

The firm handles everything from federal court litigation to professional liability cases involving doctors and lawyers to business disputes and emerging issues like solar farm developments.

“We encounter a broader variety of matters than they would encounter if they practiced at a big firm in a big city,” “We’re constantly learning new things in new areas,” Blanton said. “For example, solar farms weren’t common five to 10 years ago, but now many of our farming clients are interested in them.”



Joseph Blanton

Rural practice can have an extensive geographical reach, but Blanton sees that as an advantage. His firm manages cases across the state, including in St. Charles and St. Louis counties.

“I enjoy getting around the state and meeting people all over, so I actually like the travel part of it,” Blanton said. “You know, the fact that we practice in many different counties. We also practice in the St. Louis area ... in St. Charles County and St. Louis County.”

Blanton said his firm will often partner with larger urban firms, something Don Downing of Gray Ritter Graham affirmed. Downing, who grew up in Kennett, specializes in agricultural law and frequently works with farmers across the state.

“A lot of firms like ours ... do have a good network of lawyers across rural Missouri that we work with, and sometimes we get calls from lawyers from all over the state that have a particular case that they’d like our assistance on, so we work with them,” Downing said.

Blanton said that his law firm, with eight practicing attorneys, is sometimes utilized by other, smaller rural firms for help, similar to a more prominent urban firm assisting a rural one. Some of the firm’s biggest clients are other lawyers.

“We will sometimes be retained by people who have regular lawyers, but they have some legal matter that their regular lawyers are not comfortable handling,” Blanton said. “The biggest sources of our business are existing clients, other lawyers in the area and we sometimes get hired by people we were formerly opposed to.”

Technology as a bridge

The post-COVID world has helped make rural attorneys’ lives somewhat easier. Travel is less frequent, as more things can be done via videoconferencing.

“Prior to COVID, I was probably — we do a lot of medical liability work that involves expert witnesses, and sometimes we’ll have a case with 20 experts in the case, and they’re all over the country. It used to be that I was on an airplane going somewhere where I would have to fly several times a month,” Blanton said. “There’s a lot less travel now because so many things are done by Zoom now ... but there’s still quite a bit of travel.”



Don Downing

Dreyer said that post-COVID technology has helped lawyers and attorneys do things more efficiently, such as not having to travel for depositions and similar events. It also saves clients money by reducing the hours their attorney might have to spend traveling.

"For example, (I had) depositions in St. Louis. That's a 4-and-a-half-hour drive each way for me to travel. And before the pandemic, not being as familiar with the technology, I probably would have made the drive, but ... I was able to cover the depositions via Zoom," Dreyer said. "Judges have been much more willing to let attorneys appear remotely."

Downing said that technology has helped bridge the gap between rural and urban law firms and that artificial intelligence could continue to help level the playing field.

"COVID showed all of us in the legal profession that we can do a lot of things remotely that we didn't used to think we could ... I also think AI is going to change the way lawyers practice," Downing said. "There can be computer programs that you plug in the keywords (for document review) and ... you can do an effective document review of thousands of documents in a fraction of the time, which obviously makes that much less costly and it levels the playing field a little between among small firms ... that may happen to be based in rural Missouri."

The prosecutor puzzle

The strain also shows in prosecutors' offices in rural counties across the state. Missouri has a disproportionately high number of part-time prosecuting attorneys, in part because every county and the City of St. Louis have their own prosecuting attorney, 115 in all. In third-class counties, a prosecuting attorney is typically employed in a part-time position.

The financial reality is stark. Per Missouri statute, part-time prosecutors' salaries are based on their county's assessed valuation, ranging from \$37,000 to \$55,000 annually. In contrast, full-time prosecutors make the same as associate circuit judges.

The shortage hit a tipping point in 2023 when eight Missouri counties lacking a prosecuting attorney had to contract with neighboring counties for prosecution services.

Growing rural lawyers

The Missouri Bar is taking a "grow your own" approach to developing rural attorneys. Last year, during the bar's leadership academy program, lawyers and other bar leaders visited rural high schools to encourage students to consider pursuing legal careers.

"Kids are more likely to go home and stay there in the more rural areas," Dreyer said. "I didn't grow up around lawyers; I'm a first-generation college student, so I wanted to get out and tell my side of the story so that these kids can see that they, too, can be lawyers."

The impact of rural representation extends to the judiciary as well.

"Several of our Missouri Supreme Court judges and many of our appellate judges are from rural areas," Dreyer said. "This makes our judiciary better and stronger because they understand the issues facing all Missourians."

Meanwhile, law firms like Blanton's are working to address the shortage through their own "homegrown" approaches. Blanton's firm actively recruits law students from southeast Missouri, offering clerkships during summers and holidays.

Blanton himself was one such employee. He grew up in southeast Missouri, and his grandfather founded the law firm. He worked at the firm in college and worked in St. Louis for a couple of years after graduating law school as a clerk for a federal judge before making the decision to return to southeast Missouri, where he has been practicing since 1987.

The strategy has proven effective. The firm has since grown to eight lawyers and will add its ninth next fall.

“Of the lawyers in our office, all but one of them worked here as a student,” Blanton said. “We currently have a young lady clerking in the Southern District Court of Appeals, and she’s going to come work for us next fall when she finishes ... so she’ll be No. 9.”

Looking ahead

While technology and partnerships between urban and rural firms offer promising solutions, challenges remain. Limited-scope representation — where attorneys handle specific parts of a case remotely while local counsel handles in-person appearances — has emerged as one potential solution. The Missouri Bar also is exploring other initiatives to support rural practice, but Dreyer said it is an issue that needs to be fully “quantified” first.

“We’re looking into it in various different manners. First of all, if there even is really a problem, and if so, what’s the best way to fix it? And we haven’t been able to quantify it yet,” she said.

Legal aid organizations across the state have also developed their own programs to reach rural communities, such as the University of Missouri Law School’s rural veteran outreach program, Tigers for Troops, and Legal Aid of Western Missouri’s project to expand access to justice in rural communities by setting up offices there.

For attorneys like Blanton, rural practice’s variety and continuous learning are part of the appeal.

“I enjoy coming to work every day. I do like the variety. I’m constantly learning,” he said. “We’re all trying to understand AI, for example, and the appropriate uses. You have to be trying to constantly improve your skillset and trying to learn things that can help you do a better job for your clients.”

The combination of technology, partnerships and targeted support programs might help Missouri’s rural communities overcome these legal deserts. But for now, the reality remains: In dozens of counties across the state, residents face limited options for legal help.

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