

Rural Practice Initiative



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“Rural” is a relatively vague term in Nebraska, potentially meaning any area other than Lancaster, Douglas, or Sarpy Counties or possibly characterizing extremely small communities which may or may not be the County seat. Typically, smaller rural communities include a school, post office, bank, churches, a farmer’s elevator and Coop, and small businesses. I have always practiced law in Sidney, which is 350 miles from Lincoln and 400 miles from Omaha and has a population of approximately 5,000. My current partners grew up in Grant and Hershey. We are definitely a rural law firm.

I learned early during undergraduate school at UNL and in law school that “rural” and “western Nebraska” was a matter of perspective. I recall a professor who referred to “out West in York”. Later, after I graduated from law school, I heard references to conducting seminars “out West” in Kearney. To me, “out West” is North Platte. However you define rural, it has been my experience and it is my belief that lawyers are essential and vital to rural communities for two main reasons.

First, as lawyers we have an obligation to ensure access to the justice system and to legal services. In addition to protecting our clients’ rights, think about all the ways that lawyers help businesses, communities, and families thrive. Whether they are drafting a will, filing a partition action, forming an agricultural limited liability company, defending a criminal complaint, resolving child custody issues, probating an estate, or more, lawyers are essential to the viability of rural Nebraska.

Additionally, because of their skills, lawyers have the opportunity and are often expected to become leaders within their communities. It has been my experience and observation that lawyers are the youth soccer, baseball, and softball coaches

and referees; the active members of churches; the members and leaders of service clubs and organizations; and the board members of schools, community colleges, hospitals, and charities.

Nearly 20% of Americans live in communities that are served by only 2% of small law practices. In Nebraska, there are 11 counties with no attorneys and 20 counties with three or fewer attorneys (see map). In some of these counties, rural residents may have to travel over 100 miles to access legal services. This creates a logistical hardship, travel expenses, and time off from work.

These sobering numbers caused the NSBA to institute its Rural Practice Initiative in 2013. The current co-chairs are Tana M. Fye of Holdrege and Jeffrey C. Jarecki of Albion, and they work with 24 volunteer members. The goal of the Rural Practice Initiative is to increase the number of attorneys practicing in under-served rural communities.

Originally, the NSBA created a bus tour to allow law students the opportunity to travel to greater Nebraska. Students had the opportunity to meet local attorneys and community leaders and interview for potential associate and clerkship positions. However, students were reluctant to take one to two days off school or utilize their spring break for the trip. With that in mind, the bus tour ended, and the NSBA began to coordinate in-person interviews for five- or 10-week clerkship positions and for full time associate employment. The goal is to sponsor interview sessions in cities such as North Platte, Kearney, or Columbus two times per year. Each attorney has the opportunity to interview a number of students. There is time in the schedule for students who are not interviewing during a particular session to have the opportunity to discuss with rural lawyers the advantages of rural practice.



