

.COM

NOT FOR REPRINT

 [Click to Print](#) or Select 'Print' in your browser menu to print this document.

Page printed from: /sites/almstaff/2016/11/01/how-to-lure-lawyers-to-small-town-usa-start-there/

---

# How to Lure Lawyers to Small Town USA? Start There

By Karen Sloan  
Published: Nov 1, 2016



*Photo: Daniel J. Rao/Shutterstock.com*

Convincing new law graduates to leave major cities and set up shop in rural areas can be a tough sell.

Rural lawyers generally earn less than their city counterparts, their spouses may struggle to find professional jobs in the country, and a night out at the opera just isn't an option in a town of 2,000 people.

Will new lawyers with country roots be more receptive to hanging up a shingle in Small Town USA? A coalition of rural Nebraska colleges, the state's bar association and its flagship law school is banking on it. They've partnered to launch a first-of-its kind program whereby each year 15 standout high school students from rural areas will receive full-ride scholarships at one of three public colleges outside the state's two major cities, as well as guaranteed admission to the University of Nebraska College of Law.

The hope is that those freshly minted lawyers will return to "Greater Nebraska"—which to locals means

anywhere beyond Omaha and Lincoln—and serve those rural communities.

“If we want to try to bring young lawyers out to the country, why don’t we start with kids who are from the country in the first place?” said Lyle Koenig, a lawyer from West Point, Nebraska, (population 3,300) who conceived of the so-called Rural Law Opportunities Program after learning of a similar state program for doctors. Koenig is the co-chair of the Nebraska State Bar Association’s Rural Practice Initiative Committee, which aims to boost the population of small-town lawyers after decades of decline.

Koenig points to Alliance, a town of about 8,500 located in the Nebraska. There were 17 lawyers in Alliance 20 years ago. Today? Three.

“They aren’t meeting the needs,” Koenig said. “Access to lawyers means access to justice. If you are accused of something, if you need a divorce or if you need a deed or a contract, how do you get it if you don’t have a lawyer available?”

Alliance isn’t an anomaly. Of Nebraska’s 93 counties, 11 have no lawyers at all and 31 have three or fewer. In many cases, one of those three lawyers is a judge, said Richard Moberly, dean of the University of Nebraska’s law school.

Nebraska is hardly the only state struggling to replenish its pipeline of rural lawyers. A 2013 report from the American Bar Association called Main Street attorneys an “endangered species,” and at least eight states now have rural lawyer support programs. Those programs range from placing law students in clerkships with small-town lawyers and busing law students to rural communities for introductory meetings, to harnessing videoconferencing to connect rural clients with lawyers and offering subsidies or loan repayment assistance to young lawyers who agree to work in remote locations.

The Nebraska Bar Association already maintains a clerkship program and rural bus tours, and the state offers a modest loan repayment assistance program to lawyers who practice in underserved areas. But Nebraska appears to be the first state to address the problem by identifying high school students from small towns who want to be lawyers, and helping them achieve that goal.

Each year, five students and as many as 10 alternates per campus will be selected for the Rural Law Opportunities Program at Wayne State College, Chadron State College and the University of Nebraska at Kearney—state schools whose student bodies draw heavily from Nebraska’s rural areas. Those 15 students will receive scholarships covering their entire undergraduate tuition. Along with the alternates, they will participate in programming through the law school, including mentoring, campus visits and LSAT prep while undergraduates.

They are guaranteed a seat in the law school as long as they maintain a 3.5 grade-point average and meet a minimum LSAT score. The law school portion of the program isn’t free, though administrators said participants are still eligible for traditional law school scholarships.

“We’re hoping we cannot only increase the numbers of lawyers going to rural Nebraska, but we can also increase the number of students interested in going to law school,” Moberly said.

He acknowledged the risk that students who show an interest in the law as high schoolers may change their minds once they get to college, but said the burden is on the law school to show them the possibilities of a law degree and keep them interested in that career path. Moreover, not every graduate of the program will ultimately practice in Nebraska’s small towns (there’s no requirement to repay their undergraduate scholarships should they choose to practice in Omaha or, say, Chicago). But enough will return to rural areas—along with the 20 or so Nebraska law graduates who already set up practices in small towns each

year—that it should help reverse the decline in the state’s country lawyers, Moberly said

“This is really trying to get a core of students who don’t have to be convinced because they grew up in those areas and they understand the benefits of what it can mean to be a lawyer in those communities,” he said.

The three participating colleges signed on almost immediately, Moberly said. They are shouldering the biggest financial burden, but view the program as a way to attract highly credentialed students who may otherwise matriculate elsewhere. It will take years for the program’s participants to start representing rural clients, but at least one of the colleges is extending the rural lawyer scholarships to current students.

“If we don’t start now, the problem will only get worse,” Moberly said.

Contact Karen Sloan at [ksloan@alm.com](mailto:ksloan@alm.com). On Twitter: @KarenSloanNLJ.

---

© Copyright 2016. ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved.