



**RURAL LEGAL RESOURCES PROJECT:
STRATEGIC PLAN**



1 Expanding Interest in Rural Legal Practice

- Administering The Greater Colorado Law Student Experience: connecting law students into internships in rural Colorado communities.
- Partnering to package supports for attorneys interested in opening rural practices.
- Working with law schools to expand student exposure to and preparation for rural legal practice.

2 Support and Training for Rural Community Members and Organizations

- Equipping already existing community resources to help people navigate the legal system and find legal solutions to their life problems.

3 Connecting Resources Through the Statewide Pro Bono Center

- The ATJC's new Pro Bono Center will allow legal resources from around the state to be paired with needs in rural communities. This will help make the Front Range's 20,000 attorneys more available to meet needs across rural Colorado.

4 Implementing the Virtual Pro Se Clinic

- The VPC partners with rural libraries to provide free legal help via Zoom to patrons in communities across Colorado.

COLORADO'S RURAL LEGAL DESERTS

The American Bar Association considers any county with less than one attorney per 1000 residents to be a legal desert. By this definition, 40% of Colorado's 64 counties are legal deserts. Having limited access to attorneys and other legal resources makes it difficult for people to find positive legal solutions to their life problems.

53% of Colorado's counties have 10 or fewer attorneys available to help with civil legal needs.

60% of Colorado's land area is a legal desert.

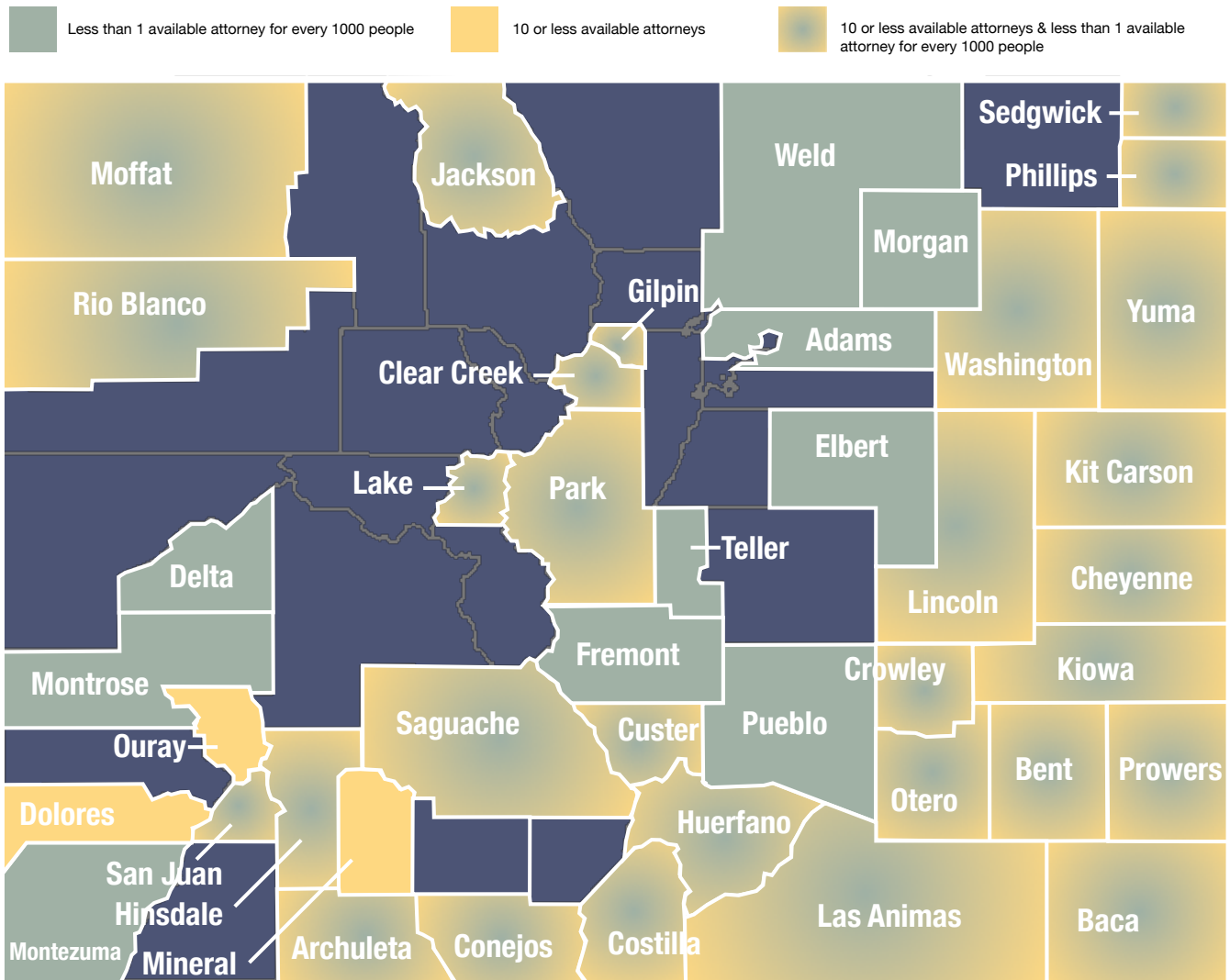
86% of defendants in civil legal and domestic relations cases in Colorado are unrepresented.



25 **90%** of Colorado attorneys live on the Front Range between Colorado Springs and Fort Collins.



Forty percent of Colorado’s 64 counties meet the American Bar Association’s definition of a legal desert because they have less than one attorney per 1000 residents. However, over 60% of Colorado counties are effectively legal deserts, given that not all licensed attorneys are available to assist litigants with civil legal needs¹. This unfortunate reality leaves too many Coloradans to fend for themselves when addressing civil legal issues. In fact, 86% of Colorado defendants in civil legal and domestic relations matters are unrepresented. Additionally, attorneys in rural communities are forced to cover expansive swaths of the state because there are so few of them. In 17% of Colorado’s counties, there is less than one attorney for every 1000 square miles. And attorneys in a third of the state’s counties cover over 200 square miles each.



From 2024 OARC Attorney Registration Data

¹ Attorneys who are judges, district attorneys, public defenders, government attorneys, have single-client practices, are in-house counsel, or hold several other positions are generally not available to assist with civil legal matters.

I. EXPANDING AND SUPPORTING INTEREST IN RURAL LEGAL PRACTICE

The presence of attorneys who are part of the community is important to the health and well-being of a community and its residents. Unfortunately, new attorneys are not moving to rural Colorado at a rate that replaces the existing attorneys in those communities who are leaving the practice of law. This fact is not unique to the legal profession though, and other professions have begun to address this challenge with programs the legal profession can learn from.

As rural Colorado communities have seen a decline in the number of individuals offering many professional services, the medical and veterinary professions have attracted professionals to rural communities through financial incentives and loan forgiveness programs. Such programs have created an awareness of the need for professionals to move to rural Colorado and created a pipeline that feeds professionals into communities that need them. No such pipeline exists for attorneys in Colorado.

The Access to Justice Commission (ATJC) recognizes an imperative to expand the interest and pathways for new attorneys to practice in rural Colorado—the efforts outlined below are a means of doing so.

A. ADMINISTERING AND EXPANDING THE GREATER COLORADO LAW STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Greater Colorado Law Student Experience (GCLSE) is designed to introduce law students to the possibilities of a rural legal career. Many law students feel a heavy pull toward corporate and big firm legal work. The GCLSE: exposes students to a different way to practice law,

- a. shows students the viability of legal practice outside of a major metro area,
- b. helps students to understand the importance of attorneys to rural communities,
- c. highlights the work-life balance available to attorneys in smaller communities, and connects students with community life in the places they serve as interns.

Last year, the program placed ten interns in pairs at five sites around the state. The internship provides a unique mixture of a judicial and a community-based internship. Interns spend three days a week in the courts and one day working with a community partner organization. Interns have Fridays off to explore the community they are working in.

The ATJC has found a deep applicant pool outside of Colorado, tapping into a large number of potential participants with rural backgrounds and an interest in working in rural communities after graduation. Additionally, Colorado is a destination state for many graduates from non-Colorado law schools. Connecting out-of-state law students with the GCLSE provides greater opportunity to generate interest in rural practice in Colorado among a much larger pool of future attorneys. In total, 63% of 2024 GCLSE applicants were from 15 non-Colorado law schools.

The 2024 interns were surveyed both pre-and post-internship to gauge their interest in working in a rural community after graduation. Pre-internship, just over 50% of the interns rated their interest as a 4 or 5 (5 being very interested), with the rest rating their interest a 2 or 3. Post-internship, 90% of the interns rated their interest as

a 4 or 5, with no interest lower than a 3. In 2025, we will add a sixth site to the program in Southeastern Colorado.

In the next year, we will build a plan for follow-up with program participants that allows us to track how many program participants choose to pursue legal careers in rural communities. Being able to track the career choices of past participants will help us understand the effectiveness of exposing students to rural practice in leading those students to choose rural legal careers.

The GCLSE is open to students after their first and second years of law school, known as the 1L year and 2L year, respectively. The current GCLSE program will continue as an introductory program to rural legal practice. For students interested in spending another summer interning in rural Colorado, we are building an advanced program as a second component of the GCLSE. The advanced program will allow students with a deeper interest in rural practice to spend time in traditional practice settings and learn in greater detail the skills they need to practice in rural Colorado.

The advanced program will focus on putting students in a practice-based internship. These internships will either be with public service organizations that will allow students to practice under the Student Practice Act or with small law firms or solo practitioners. The goal of the program will be to give students a practice-oriented experience in rural Colorado. The program will also include a “classroom” component that introduces students to various aspects of rural practice and running a practice in a rural setting. The program will be open to all 2L students but will give a strong priority to students who participated in the first year of the GCLSE. Our goal is to pilot the program in the summer of 2025 and expand it the following year (though the timetable will be dependent on the partners we are able to engage with).

The success of GCLSE includes participation in the program itself and, ultimately, placement of new lawyers from GCLSE into legal careers in rural Colorado communities. The existing GCLSE program and the proposed advanced GCLSE program work to achieve these goals by (1) exposing law students to rural practice and (2) facilitating post-graduate placement in the same communities. How many students participate in the program is an intermediary measure of the program’s success. After students are introduced to career opportunities in rural Colorado communities, we will measure the change in their interest in becoming a rural legal practitioner after going through the program.

Another measure of GCLSE’s success will be the number of program participants who end up working in rural Colorado communities following graduation from law school. The advanced GCLSE program aims to help students build relationships that can lead to future employment and practice opportunities. In the next year, we will build a plan to follow up with program participants and track how many choose to pursue legal careers in rural communities. Being able to track the career choices of past participants will help us understand the effectiveness of GCLSE in leading new attorneys to choose rural legal careers.

Washburn University’s Law School (Kansas) operates a similar internship program. In its first six years of existence, the program has facilitated the placement of 23% of program participants into legal practice in the community where they interned following their graduation. A successful GCLSE will see similar placement of program participants into practice in rural Colorado communities. We anticipate beginning to track the placement of program participants into rural Colorado communities this year. Within three years of the beginning of the advanced program, we expect the program to begin to result in some program participants becoming attorneys in the community where they interned.

B. BUILDING AND PACKAGING SUPPORTS FOR ATTORNEYS INTERESTED IN RURAL PRACTICE

Many attorneys do not consider rural practice as a career option because the prospect of setting up and operating a practice in a rural community is daunting and less financially certain than taking a salaried position at a metro area firm. In response to this problem, several states have built measures and supports designed to encourage attorneys to live and work in rural communities. These supports include general stipends, business expense stipends, loan forgiveness programs, mentoring programs, and business incubator programs.

While the scope of this grant does not allow us to advocate for legislative dollars to support loan forgiveness and stipend programs, there are other avenues to help attorneys interested in rural practice in Colorado. Some of those supports already exist and need only be modified, redirected, or packaged in appealing ways to become more available for attorneys considering rural practice. Several of Colorado's legal contracting organizations (Office of Alternate Defense Counsel, Office of the Child Representative, Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel, and Colorado Legal Services) have already begun discussing how their organizations can provide financial support and stability to new rural attorneys. Legal Entrepreneurs for Justice, the Colorado Bar Association, and Modern Law University provide training that helps attorneys build sustainable small practices. The Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program provides broad supports for new attorneys and attorneys looking to expand practice areas.

While these resources each exist in their own silo, attorneys or newly graduated law students must find and connect with each resource independently. To more effectively support new rural attorneys, we will work to make resources more accessible as a package. This will aid attorneys seeking to practice in rural communities by facilitating their connection to these resources and decreasing the anxiety and uncertainty of stepping out to establish a practice in a rural community. Further, we will also work to develop new resources like rural legal job fairs, rural practice succession planning, and rural attorney referral services to help support attorneys in establishing viable rural practices.

These supports, while closely related to GCLSE, will not be exclusively for students who complete the GCLSE. We will aim to have a support package in place beginning by the summer/fall of 2026, after the two years of the GCLSE are established.

When paired with the GCLSE, these supports will help increase interest in rural practice and provide a pathway to practice in a rural community. Efforts to implement these supports will succeed if attorneys utilize them to not only establish rural practices but also to ensure those practices withstand the test of time. Accordingly, the ability of those who utilize the supports to maintain their practice for 3-5 years will be the ultimate measure of success.

C. WORKING WITH LAW SCHOOLS TO EXPAND STUDENT EXPOSURE TO RURAL LEGAL PRACTICE

Colorado's two law schools are the University of Denver Sturm College of Law (DU Law) and the University of Colorado Law School (CU Law). The two schools do not sufficiently make students aware of rural legal practice as a viable career choice and do not adequately prepare students to enter the practice of law in rural communities. While the GCLSE is an excellent first step to rural practice, there are many other ways to engage Colorado's law schools in informing students of the need for and preparing students to participate in the rural practice of law.

Each of Colorado's law schools has clinical programs that allow students, under the supervision of attorneys, to

gain practical experience providing legal supports. Currently, none of these clinical programs has a rural focus. There is therefore an opportunity to connect with current clinics addressing areas of need in rural communities and work to develop a partial rural focus within their existing structures. These clinics include CU's Civil Practice and Entrepreneurial Law Clinic, DU's Civil Litigation Clinic, and Community Economic Development Clinic. Multiple models for rural law clinics at law schools across the country could be replicated at Colorado law schools.

Beyond the school's clinical programs, and in addition to the GCLSE, we will work with the law schools in Colorado to develop pathways that could lead students to rural practice. These pathways could include building rural practice endorsement programs, seminars, and speakers exposing students to rural practice, rural legal job fairs, and developing rural practice classes.

We will begin to engage with both law schools beginning in early 2025 to explore possible partnerships and pathways. The focus will be on building resources and connections as quickly as possible but will largely be dependent on receptivity and capacity within the schools. The first measure of success will be the number of students that we can expose to rural practice. Over the long term, we might further measure success by the number of students who participate in rural practice engagement programs and then choose to practice law in rural communities.

II. SUPPORT AND TRAINING FOR NON-PROFITS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Another imperative measure for addressing legal needs in rural Colorado is partnering with non-legal professionals already at work in rural communities. As previously noted, we must work toward the goal of connecting more legal professionals to rural communities to support their legal needs. In reality, however, new attorneys in rural communities cannot meet the need for legal supports that exist in Colorado's rural legal deserts. When legal supports and resources do not exist, people tend to go to trusted community members and organizations for support in solving and navigating life problems. As we seek to create resources for the legal needs in rural Colorado, we must lean into the human resources that already exist in our rural communities. We can do so by providing tools and resources to trusted community members and organizations to equip them to better support people as they help them solve life problems. By partnering with community members and organizations, we can build a network of legal supports that are already embedded in the community and do not require the creation of new legal jobs. We can do so by working with existing non-legal professionals to pinpoint areas of legal need they regularly encounter, and providing them with training and other supports for assisting their clients in navigating those areas of need.

We will explore two primary approaches in supporting and training non-profits and trusted community members. While the two programs are similar, we will work toward building both, as they provide different levels of support for people with legal problems and require different levels of training and investment from community organizations.

The first approach is captured in a concept known as "legal first aid." This approach has been pioneered by an organization called Legal Link from the San Francisco Bay Area and has been replicated in other states, including Oklahoma and South Carolina. The underlying idea behind legal first aid is to train community members who are already helping people solve life problems to be able to identify when those problems have legal solutions. Many people do not know the life problems they are experiencing have legal solutions and do not intuitively turn to

the justice system as a tool for solving those problems. Legal first aid training equips service providers and community helpers with the knowledge and resources to know how to help the people they are serving better navigate to appropriate and positive legal solutions.

Legal first aid programs accomplish this by providing broad, generalized training and follow-up support materials. The training also includes education about the unauthorized practice of law and how to provide legal information without crossing over into legal advice. Legal first aid training can be highly effective at reaching a large number of non-legal service providers relatively quickly and then helping those providers feel better equipped to aid the people they serve every day. The Oklahoma program has already trained over 500 community members in its first year and a half of existence.

The second approach is the training and certification of “community justice workers.” Community justice workers are non-legal professionals who receive specialized training in a very narrow area of legal need and are authorized to give legal advice in the area in which they are trained. Community justice workers are certified by a legal services organization after the completion of their training and are overseen by that legal services organization for any services they deliver. Several community justice worker programs exist around the country, providing services such as benefits navigation, medical debt support, protection order support for domestic violence survivors, and eviction prevention and support. Some of these programs have required regulatory reform or unauthorized practice of law waivers to operate, while others have not.

We will develop a program that trains, certifies, and tracks community justice workers so they may provide government benefits navigation. In doing so we will steer clear of the need for regulatory reform, as advice about many government benefits programs does not require the practice of law. Multiple Department of Human Services Directors that we spoke to while gathering information for this plan directly addressed the need to have people in their community trained with the knowledge to help community members navigate benefits programs, including benefits appeals. This program will both allow us to help provide much-needed support in Colorado’s rural communities and allow us to establish the potential effectiveness of community justice workers in addressing legal needs in rural Colorado.

Building both legal first aid and community justice worker programs will require us to engage with national partners who have expertise in such programs. These partners include, but are not limited to Legal Link, The Oklahoma Access to Justice Foundation, Innovation for Justice (i4J), and Frontline Justice. We will lean on the expertise and experience of these organizations to build strong coalitions within the communities we are focusing on. For programs such as these to be successful, community engagement and leadership is essential. i4J, in particular, is an expert at building such programs jointly with the community. Additionally, we will work to build partnerships with legal service providers, subject matter experts, organizations in Colorado already training legal navigators in some form or another, and potential credentialing and oversight organizations. Partnering broadly within Colorado is essential to the success of both legal first aid and community justice worker programs.

Work on these programs will begin immediately with the engagement of national partners, local partners, and potential users of the resources. The goal will be to have one training program in place by the end of 2025, with the first partners completing training in the Spring of 2026. Whether it be legal first aid or community justice

workers will be determined by the work with our partners. Measurements of success will vary depending on the areas of training.²

III. CONNECTING RESOURCES THROUGH STATEWIDE PRO BONO CENTER

The ATJC will begin building a Statewide Pro Bono Center in 2025. The center will support Colorado’s many pro bono initiatives, provide a central organizing hub, and connect legal resources to those with need all around the state. A large portion of the Center’s operations will support and impact rural Coloradans. While many of the specifics about how the center will operate and the types of resources that will be available through the center will be determined in the coming year, the needs of rural Colorado will greatly inform those determinations. As the pro bono center takes shape, we will work closely to ensure that the needs identified through this project are addressed.

The first step in the Pro Bono Center’s development is to survey existing needs and resources. The center will work with existing pro bono programs, law firms, and other legal resources to coordinate efforts to meet needs across the state. With such a high concentration of legal resources on the Front Range, the ability to connect those resources with the needs that exist elsewhere in the state is essential to addressing the justice gap in rural Colorado. The center will improve ways for the legal needs of individuals around the state to be paired with legal resources that are capable of meeting those needs. That focus will utilize a wide range of support mechanisms that may include full representation, unbundled legal services and supports, legal clinics, and others.

Working to connect Front Range legal resources with the rest of the state will be an essential component in meeting the legal needs in rural Colorado. Across the country, even the most successful programs to encourage rural practice have only seen between 2 and 5 attorneys join or start rural practices each year. Community justice worker programs and legal first aid programs, while scalable, are limited by the number of community partners, training times, practice areas serviced, and capacities of those trained and certified. The Pro Bono Center, while having its own set of limitations, will provide an opportunity to further open up the nearly 20,000 attorneys that live in Colorado’s eleven largest Front Range counties as a legal resource for the rest of the state. Such a large pool of attorneys will allow for more individual needs to be met and for more specialized needs to be addressed, including some that this project has identified, such as eviction supports, wills and estate planning, and small business and community economic supports.

IV. VIRTUAL PRO SE CLINIC

The Virtual Pro Se Clinic (VPC) is an example of the types of resources the Pro Bono Center will help create. The VPC provides patrons with a short consultation with an attorney, over Zoom, at a local library. In communities where there are very few legal resources, the VPC is an accessible lifeline that helps people understand the problem they are dealing with and know how to move forward. Many people in rural Colorado communities identify the “free library clinic” as one of the few, if not the only, legal resource available to them.

² While measurements of success will be specific to the training, some possible measures include partners trained, net promoter score, numbers of individuals served, and value of benefits/resources brought into the community through support of trained individuals.

The VPC is also an extremely valuable tool for continuing to learn about the legal needs of Colorado's rural legal deserts. The clinic serves as a touchpoint to the needs of rural Coloradans. The issues presented by patrons of the VPC help us to better understand the needs of individuals in the communities that the clinic serves. Additionally, the framework of community connections the VPC builds will serve as a testing ground for other resources created by the ATJC, and the knowledge gained through the VPC will identify needs that can be addressed through the ATJC's policy work.

The ATJC took over the VPC in partnership with the Colorado Lawyers Committee (CLC) earlier this year. The ATJC provides staffing for the program, while the CLC works alongside ATJC staff to provide program planning and a volunteer network to feed the VPC. As of November, the VPC is operating eleven monthly clinics serving fourteen rural libraries across the state. The program's success is measured both in the number of communities it reaches, the number of patrons served in those communities, and the program's ability to serve diverse communities.

Next year, the VPC will continue to grow in capacity. The VPC's current structure allows for up to 13 more clinic time slots to be added. Additionally, we are in the process of adding a team of contract attorneys who will each lead at least one clinic per month, further expanding the VPC's capacity. Next year, the VPC will also begin to train volunteer attorneys to lead and facilitate individual clinic sessions. Finally, next year, the VPC will launch a pilot program through a partnership with a community organization to run a Spanish-language version of the clinic, making the clinic more accessible to rural Coloradans with limited English proficiency.

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