Research Brief: Rural Access to Justice: Key Research Learnings and Implications for Service Design and Delivery

American Bar Foundation
Access to Justice Research Initiative[1]

Context: Structural Conditions Shaping Rural Access to Justice

- **Rural Americans have limited access to authorized legal help.** Most rural communities have few or no individuals who are authorized to provide legal assistance. In Texas, for example, nearly half (48 percent) of counties have fewer than one authorized provider (lawyer) per 1,000 residents, limiting access to legal help.[2]
- **Rurality intersects with other forms of disadvantage.** Empirical research shows that rural residence interacts with poverty, age, disability, and race to increase exposure to civil justice problems and to reduce the likelihood that those problems are resolved.[3]
- **Internet access is limited or unavailable in many rural communities and rural Americans may struggle to use digital solutions.** Rural residents are more likely to lack reliable broadband internet and to have lower levels of digital literacy, constraining the effectiveness of online or technology-based legal services.[4]

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2 Teufel, James and Michael Gallo, M, 2022. The minimum number of lawyers needed to eliminate legal deserts in the United States. Legal Evolution, 345 https://www.legalevolution.org/2022/12/the-minimum-number-of-lawyers-needed-to-eliminate-legal-deserts-in-the-united-states-345/; American Bar Association, Profile of the Legal Profession 2020 report; State Bar of Texas Department of Research and Analysis, Attorney Population Density by Metropolitan Statistical Area 2025.

3 See, for example, Young, Kathryne M., and Katie R. Billings. "An intersectional examination of US civil justice problems." *Utah L. Rev.* (2023): 487; and, https://www.justice.gov/atj/fact-sheet-access-justice-rural-access

4 Junod, Anne N. and Corianne Payton Scally, 2025, Expanding Digital Opportunity in Rural Communities. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/additional-materials/Expanding_Digital_Opportunity_in_Rural_Communities_.pdf. Sandefur, Rebecca L. 2019. Legal Tech For Non-Lawyers: Report of the US Survey of Legal Technologies. Chicago, IL: American Bar Foundation https://www.americanbarfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/report_us_digital_legal_tech_for_nonlawyers.pdf. For Texas specifically, see https://digitalopportunityfortexas.com/#digital-opportunity

- **Geographic isolation creates physical access barriers.** Long distances, limited or nonexistent public transportation, and centralized courts or service providers pose significant burdens to rural residents—especially low-income people, older adults, and people with disabilities.[5]
- **Dense social ties complicate help-seeking.** The small scale of rural communities and overlapping social, professional, and institutional relationships raise challenges to privacy and confidentiality and can generate formal, informal, or positional conflicts that impede access to legal assistance and just solutions.[6]

Lessons for Rural Legal Services Delivery

1. **Lawyer-centered models are difficult to scale and sustain in rural contexts.** Research demonstrates persistent challenges in incentivizing lawyers to locate and remain in rural areas. Rural private attorneys are rarely reliable sources of broad-based pro bono assistance, and circuit-riding models consume substantial lawyer time in travel rather than service delivery.[7]
2. **Effective assistance meets people where they already are.** Services are most effective when they are timely, targeted (problem-specific), delivered through trusted points of contact, and transparent, clearly explaining options and next steps. What makes a service believed to be trustworthy is not uniform: it is shaped by characteristics such as age, gender, language, political identity, and past experiences with institutions. A service or provider trusted by one group of rural residents may be mistrusted by another. As a result, effective rural access to justice strategies require **multiple, locally grounded, and culturally responsive touchpoints.**[8]
3. **Technology is most effective as a support for human assistance, not a substitute.** Technology can meaningfully extend the reach and capacity of human service providers, but stand-alone digital tools frequently go unused. Barriers include lack of broadband internet, limited device access, and gaps in both technical and functional literacy. Technology works best when embedded in relationships and delivered alongside human guidance and support.[9]

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5 Blumenberg, E., & Pierce, G. (2014). *A driving force: Mobility, transportation, and social inequality in the United States.* Journal of Planning Literature, 29(2), 165–177.

6 See, for example, Pruitt, Lisa R., Amanda L. Kool, Lauren Sudeall, Michele Statz, Danielle M. Conway, and Hannah Haksgaard. "Legal deserts: A multi-state perspective on rural access to justice." HARv. L. & PoL'Y REv. 13 (2018): 15; and, Statz, Michele. ""It is here we are loved": Rural place attachment in active judging and access to justice." *Law & Social Inquiry* 49, no. 1 (2024): 247-277.

7 Pruitt *et al.* supra note 6; Chambliss, Elizabeth. "Rural Legal Markets." *Tex. A&M L. Rev.* 12 (2024): 961.

8 Burnett, Matthew, and Rebecca L. Sandefur. "Designing just solutions at scale: lawyerless legal services and evidence-based regulation." *Direito Público* 19, no. 102 (2022); Burnett, Matthew and Rebecca L. Sandefur, A People-Centered Approach to Designing and Evaluating Community Justice Worker Programs in the United States, 51 Fordham Urb. L.J. 1509 (2024); Young, Kathryne M., Getting Help, 2024 Wis. L. Rev. 1149 (2024).

9 Sandefur, Rebecca L. 2019. Legal Tech For Non-Lawyers: Report of the US Survey of Legal Technologies. Chicago, IL: American Bar Foundation https://www.americanbarfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/report_us_digital_legal_tech_for_nonlawyers.pdf ; Rostain, Tanina. "Techno-optimism & access to the legal system." Daedalus 148, no. 1 (2019): 93-97. Hagan, Margaret. "The Supply and Demand of Legal Help on the Internet." Margaret D. Hagan, The Supply and Demand of Legal Help on the Internet," Legal Tech and the Future of Civil Justice, edited by David Freeman Engstrom. Cambridge University Press (2023).

Implications for Service Design

1. Because **lawyer-centered models do not scale, stand-alone technology is insufficient,** and **rural communities are socially and economically diverse as well as geographically dispersed,** effective rural access-to-justice solutions must rely on **multiple, locally grounded connection points to legal help.**

2. **Build on existing human and community infrastructure.** Effective rural access strategies engage people and institutions that are already embedded in rural communities—such as community and senior centers, veterans' groups, schools and their staff, community health systems and health care workers. These actors can serve not just as referral points to already over-stretched legal aid organizations, but, with appropriate training and support, as providers of **meaningful, problem-specific legal assistance** that reaches people where they already seek help.[10]

3. **Identify and leverage existing infrastructure through spatial asset analysis.** Designing such systems requires a **spatial asset analysis** that maps existing services and providers outside the legal sector across different geographic areas. This approach identifies where trusted institutions already exist and how they are distributed relative to population and need. For example, when legal services partners in Alaska conducted a statewide spatial asset analysis, they identified numerous potential partners—including post offices, libraries, and tribal governments—and found that **health care providers were the most widely and consistently distributed institutional presence across the state,** making them a particularly promising anchor for legal services delivery in remote and rural areas.[11]

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10 See, for example, Burnett, Matthew, Rebecca L. Sandefur, and James Teufel. 2025. "Research Brief: Analysis of the Social and Economic Impact of the Alaska Community Justice Worker Program (2021-2025)." American Bar Foundation Access to Justice Research Initiative. Chicago, IL: American Bar Foundation. Nelson, Nikole, Rebecca L. Sandefur, and Matthew Burnett. Empowering Justice Through Community Justice Workers. MIE Journal (2024); Anderson, Joy and Sarah Carver. 2024. "Community Justice Workers – Alaska's Response to the Access to Justice Crisis." MIE JOURNAL 38(1):33-36. Anderson, Joy, Sarah Carver, and Robert Onders. "Community Justice Workers: Part of the Solution to Alaska's Legal Deserts." Alaska L. Rev. 41 (2024): 9.

11 Marz, Stacy, Mara Kimmel and Miguel Willis, 2017. Alaska's Justice Ecosystem: Building a Partnership of Providers. Anchorage, AK: Alaksa Court System Access to Justice Committee. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/human_services_rural_contexts_report_jan2023.pdf. See also Brimsek, E., James Murdoch, Emma Ward, Neel Chakraborti and Ashton Cain. (2023). Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts: Comprehensive Report, OPRE Report # 2023-030, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/human_services_rural_contexts_report_jan2023.pdf