

Demystifying Law Practice in Greater Wisconsin

Over the coming months, several attorneys will share the facts and their experiences to help correct assumptions and demystify the professional and personal realities of practicing in rural Wisconsin.

The rural justice gap deeply affects everyone who lives in or next to Wisconsin, residents and attorneys alike.

According to State Bar of Wisconsin membership records, there are more than 16,000 active, Wisconsin-licensed attorneys, but this number is insufficient to fill state residents' legal needs, especially in "Greater Wisconsin." In fact, only 11,782 attorneys currently live in Wisconsin, and only 4,110 live in any county other than Milwaukee, Waukesha, and Dane.¹ While more than two-thirds of Wisconsin residents live outside these three counties, less than one-quarter of Wisconsin attorneys do.²

After accounting for lawyers employed by each county and those listed as "active" but not practicing full time, there are very few private attorneys – if any – to handle the remaining criminal, family, business, and other legal issues that residents in every community in our state face. These numbers are most stark in the truly rural swaths of the state.

The problems caused by this shortage of lawyers for Wisconsinites in rural counties are similar to, but much worse, than some of the problems faced in Madison and Milwaukee. In every area of practice, potential clients are more likely to be turned away due to an attorney's conflict of interest or unavailability. For example, defendants in criminal cases can wait months for an attorney and might ultimately be paired with one from several counties over.³ And divorcing parties who want an attorney might be unable to find any in their area, much less any who also have the capacity to take their case. In fact, looking at some pre-pandemic numbers,

only 14% of residents in rural "legal deserts" received help for their civil legal problems.⁴

For all licensed Wisconsin attorneys, the imbalance between supply of and demand for legal services creates a barrier to fully and efficiently serving the communities where they live. Attorneys who live and work in underserved areas must decline more and more work due to lack of capacity. Although this might seem like a good problem for a small business to have, it can nonetheless be disheartening and leave massive amounts of business on the table. Meanwhile, attorneys new to a location might struggle to find a mentor or network to support their work.⁵

Different problems arise for new attorneys committed to working in the most-populous counties. An abundance

BY PAIGE JUEL

We will discuss incomes in different parts of the state, cost of living, personal and professional opportunities in rural Wisconsin, and advice on how to excel practicing law in rural Wisconsin.



Paige P. Juel (formerly Resch), U.W. 2017, is the private attorney involvement director at Judicare Legal Aid (former Wisconsin Judicare Inc.), Wausau. She previously worked as a staff attorney on elder, tribal, and miscellaneous civil law matters. She is a member of the State Bar of Wisconsin's Elder Law & Special Needs, Family Law, Indian Law, Public Interest Law, and Solo Small Firm & General Practice sections and the Young Lawyers Division. She also served on State Bar committees for advancing access to justice in Greater Wisconsin.

pjuel@judicare.org



of new and experienced attorneys in these counties means more competition for positions and new business and often lower wages than expected. Even for established attorneys practicing in large or medium-sized cities in Wisconsin, the demand for attorneys in rural counties can increase the amount of work done for remote clients or the amount of travel needed to serve them.

This is not to say that all legal needs in Wisconsin's largest cities are being met. Unfortunately, many other barriers to justice remain throughout the state. But where there is a mismatch between the legal needs and the number of legal professionals, the clients facing the most barriers to getting the help they need will struggle the most.

Although the access-to-justice gap in rural Wisconsin has gotten worse, it is not a new problem. It has been a state and national concern for many years.⁶ The State Bar of Wisconsin has observed the growing problem and tried to encourage attorneys and law students to consider working in rural areas. Often, the reasons given for choosing not to consider Greater Wisconsin are based on misassumptions and myths about rural practice.

The Gap Can Be Narrowed

Over the coming months, I and other attorneys will be sharing the facts and our experiences to help correct misassumptions and demystify the professional and personal realities of practicing in rural Wisconsin. We will discuss incomes in different parts of the state, cost of living, personal and professional opportunities in rural Wisconsin, and advice on how to excel practicing law in rural Wisconsin.

My articles will include deeper looks at current news and studies on rural practice, takeaways from serving on Greater Wisconsin Initiative Committees, and my experience with rural and tribal law and as the private attorney involvement director for Judicare Legal Aid (formerly Wisconsin Judicare Inc.). My experience is in civil law, especially family law. Other authors will cover criminal law in greater detail.

I am particularly motivated to inspire law students and attorneys to consider working in Greater Wisconsin. I am also constantly working with attorneys who are inundated with work and hoping that more attorneys join their ranks, and I will pass some of their experiences along to you.

If you are interested in sharing your thoughts or expertise on the pros and cons of rural practice, you are invited to contact State Bar of Wisconsin Communications Director Joe Forward, jforward@wisbar.org, to become a contributor for this series.

For now, I end with this: There is a lot more to Greater Wisconsin than many people realize. If you love hunting, fishing, and other outdoor fun, I don't need to sell you on that part of the lifestyle. But there's also more work, more socializing, more networking, more diversity, and more fun to be had. I look forward to sharing some of that with you. **WL**

ENDNOTES

¹In this article, "Greater Wisconsin" refers to the other 69 counties in Wisconsin, which still includes many metropolitan areas. "Rural Wisconsin," "rural counties" and other terms are used more interchangeably for the especially remote counties and areas in the state.

²World Population Review, *Population of Counties in Wisconsin (2023)*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/wisconsin/counties> (last visited Apr. 19, 2023).

³Peter Coutu, *Where the Lawyers Aren't*, *Isthmus* (Jan. 18, 2018), <https://isthmus.com/news/cover-story/attorney-shortage-in-rural-wisconsin-compounds-opioid-crisis/>; Hannah Haksgaard, *Court-Appointment Compensation and Rural Access to Justice*, Univ. of St. Thomas J. L. & Pub. Pol'y (Dec. 2020), <https://ir.stthomas.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1141&context=ustjlpp>.

⁴Michele Statz & Paula Termuhlen, *Rural Legal Deserts Are a Critical Health Determinant*, *Am. J. Pub. Health* 1519 (Oct. 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7483108/#bib1>.

⁵Resources and tips will appear in future articles.

⁶Legal Servs. Corp., *The Justice Gap: Measuring the Unmet Civil Legal Needs of Low-Income Americans* (June 2017), www.lsc.gov/sites/default/files/images/TheJusticeGap-FullReport.pdf; Access to Justice Committee, State Bar of Wis., *Bridging the Justice Gap: Wisconsin's Unmet Legal Needs* (March 2007), <https://www.wisbar.org/aboutus/reports/Documents/bridgingthegap.pdf>. **WL**

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