

Legal Deserts: Expanding ACCESS Through Technology

BY KATHERINE STOCKS, ESQ.

David Dettman’s mission distillation for the American Bar Association¹ demonstrates that “the rule of law is essential for promoting social cohesion and inclusivity. By ensuring laws are applied impartially and individuals have access to justice, the rule of law helps build trust within society and reduces social tensions.” Reducing Nevada’s legal deserts increases trust in the rule of law and “empowers marginalized groups including women, minorities, and vulnerable populations”²

In the June 2024 issue of *Nevada Lawyer* focused on rural practice, I provided a brief overview of the concept of a legal desert and suggested Nevada focus at a micro level to appropriately address the unique needs of each community. I also mentioned the forthcoming Legal Deserts Summit, hosted by the Supreme Court’s Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and the National Center for State Courts. To summarize the summit, Nevada has many various contributing factors to a legal desert, and we focused on five common contributing factors.³

1. Geographic Isolation: Legal deserts are often found in rural or frontier areas where geographic distance from

urban centers makes it difficult to access legal services. Residents in these regions may have to travel long distances to reach the nearest attorney or courthouse, creating significant barriers to justice.

- 2. Limited Availability of Legal Professionals:** A shortage of attorneys and legal aid services is a defining characteristic of legal deserts. Often Nevada’s bar is aging out of private practice or serving in a government capacity in our rural communities.
- 3. Economic Barriers:** Individuals in legal deserts may face financial constraints that make it difficult to afford legal services.
- 4. Lack of Legal Education and Awareness:** In legal deserts, there is often limited access to information and resources about legal rights and processes. This lack of legal education and awareness can leave



residents unaware of their rights or unable to navigate the legal system on their own.

5. Technological Gaps: While technology has the potential to bridge gaps in access to justice, legal deserts may be characterized by poor technological infrastructure. Limited access to reliable internet or digital tools can prevent residents from benefiting from online legal services, further exacerbating the challenges in these areas.

To bridge these themes, Nevada is well-positioned to expand its reach into underserved communities by building on existing infrastructure and leveraging technological innovations. Through sustainable investment and creative rule changes, Nevada can make substantial progress in addressing legal deserts and focus to provide all court users—regardless of location—access to the justice system.

In spring 2024, a team of Nevada's decisionmakers came together in Las Vegas to learn from other states' experiences. I want to thank all the participants for their genuine interest in the topic and active participation throughout the event:

- Chief Justice **Elissa Cadish**;
- Associate Chief Justice **Lidia Stiglich**;
- **Bailey Bortolin** for the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada;
- **Julie Cavanaugh-Bill** for the State Bar of Nevada;
- Assemblywoman **Venicia Considine** for the Nevada State Assembly;
- **Richard Dreitzer** for the State Bar of Nevada;
- **Kimberly Farmer** for the State Bar of Nevada;
- **Jamie Gradick** for the Administrative Office of the Courts;
- **Eve Hanan** for the William S. Boyd School of Law;
- **John McCormick** for the Administrative Office of the Courts; and
- **Marcie Ryba** formerly with the Nevada State Public Defender's Office.

Some of the relevant presentations and discussions included:

- Technology-based legal services;
- Self-help legal resources;
- Innovative options to place attorneys in rural communities;
- Expanding law school attendance options;
- Incentive programs for legal professionals;
- Less-restrictive options for bar admission; and
- Licensed legal technicians.

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While the above list requires Nevada's legal community to come together to institute change, the AOC can directly address technology-based legal services. Technological tools like the Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) chatbot, enabling remote hearings, online document filing, and digital dispute resolution all offer efficient and flexible options for reducing the size of our legal deserts. These innovations make the justice system more accessible to all court users, reducing delays while accommodating individuals who may struggle with physical attendance in court processes. Concertedly, we maintain analog alternatives, such as in-person services and paper filings for those who lack access to or comfort with digital solutions. This important hybrid approach, combining digital convenience with traditional methods, ensures that the justice system remains truly accessible to all.

The AOC, in collaboration with the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, is making a significant advancement in this area with the development of the RAG self-help chatbot, which empowers individuals who might otherwise be left without adequate legal resources, streamlining access to information for self-represented litigants in a user-friendly, tech-savvy way.

We are proud to share the remarkable success of our RAG chatbot. Since its official launch in June 2024 through September 2024:

- 2,800 active users have engaged the chatbot in more than 4,000 sessions.
- The chatbot's user-friendly design, multilingual capabilities, and efficiency have garnered strong engagement, with each session averaging one minute, 47 seconds—an indicator of the valuable support it delivers.
- More than 57 percent of users are accessing the chatbot from a desktop, 42.3 percent via mobile, and 0.3 percent via tablet. We are extremely pleased to see our efforts to meet the user where their technology preference lies is paying off.

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Users from diverse regions, including cities like Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Reno, and Sacramento, have embraced the chatbot, reflecting its broad appeal and effectiveness in breaking geographical barriers.

A highlight of the chatbot is its global language support, allowing it to assist users in more than 50 languages. Whether users communicate in English, Spanish, Chinese, or even Norwegian Bokmål, the chatbot can provide meaningful, accessible legal assistance. This feature is crucial to ensure that the justice system is inclusive, catering to individuals from different cultures and backgrounds.

As we celebrate these achievements, we are committed to continue enhancing the RAG chatbot's capabilities and expanding its reach. Our success thus far reinforces the importance of integrating human-monitored technological innovation with a continued emphasis on accessibility and user-centric design. We are excited about the future and confident in our ability to create even more valuable interactions as we move forward!

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development and testing of this innovative tool, especially our beta testers. Together, we are creating a more inclusive, responsive, and trusted justice system.

Rebuilding trust in the justice system is essential to its integrity and

effectiveness. For many, courts may feel inaccessible and intimidating, leading to a sense of alienation from institutions meant to protect their rights. To restore public confidence, it is critical to improve access to justice and provide opportunities for all people, regardless of socioeconomic status, to have their voices heard and their cases fairly adjudicated. This goal can be achieved by reducing legal deserts by embracing both digital innovations and traditional practices, prioritizing user needs and service.



KATHERINE STOCKS has served as the state court administrator for Nevada since February 2021. She serves with a team of nearly 100 professionals in the Administrative Office of the Courts, whose mission is to be an influential and respected voice for the Nevada judiciary. Before joining the AOC, she served for almost six years as the court administrator for the 10th Judicial District of Kansas in Johnson County. Prior to joining the judiciary, she served in private practice with the law firm Goldblatt, Martin, Pozen in Washington from 2011-15. She received her undergraduate degree in economics from Kansas State University and her J.D. from the University of the District of Columbia.

ENDNOTES:

1. Upholding Prosperity: The Economic Benefits of the Rule of Law, Dettman, David, September 13, 2024 <https://www.americanbar.org/advocacy/global-programs/news/2024/upholding-prosperity-economic-benefits-rule-law>, last visited October 3, 2024.
2. Id.
3. Lisa A. Pruitt, Amanda L. Kool, Lauren Sudeall, Michelle Statz, Danielle M. Conway, & Hannah Haksgaard, Legal Deserts: A Multistate Perspective on Rural Access to Justice, 13 Harv. L. & P. R. 16, Pages 18-25 (2018).