

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Rural Practice Offers Many Challenges, Rewards

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It is so fitting that my last President's Message appears in the issue focused on rural practice. This fast-paced year has been great – I've met many new people and reconnected with old acquaintances, learned more about the concerns our licensees have about what the state bar stands for, and strove to make the bar more responsive to those concerns. Thank you for this opportunity to serve through some difficult times and some momentous occasions.

As the first president from rural Nevada in 25 years, I have had the unique chance to emphasize and highlight the needs and viewpoints of those of us practicing in our rural communities. The State Bar of Nevada has been able to continue its Rural Practice Working Group and has implemented benefits for rural licensees and courts, such as increased online access to CLE programs, free advertising in our online Career Center, and the introduction of a proposed rule change to the Nevada Supreme Court to increase the ability

of rural district attorneys and public defender's office to better seek out and recruit highly qualified attorneys who otherwise may not look to rural Nevada for career opportunities.

Practicing in the rural counties is something I have grown to love and cherish. I moved to Nevada in 2002 from doing complex commercial litigation in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area to serving as the director for a small non-profit in Crescent Valley, Nevada, and then becoming licensed in Nevada in 2009. The urban-to-rural perspective has helped me grow in my professional and personal life. The transition from urban legal practice to rural practice is an experience that, for me, has given me new insight into the similarities and differences of both, personal insight into the miscalculated stigmas some have on rural practice, opportunities for wellness, and the ability to contribute to nationwide dialogue on the issue of "legal deserts."

Throughout the past year, in my role as president of the State Bar of Nevada, I have had the opportunity to speak to high school, undergraduate, and law school students. They often ask me if practicing law is anything like we see in the movies or on television, as they imagine bustling big-city law firms, high-rise buildings, and courtroom dramas. Some of that is true – as I observed in my federal law practice in Minneapolis and with respect to drama ... and trauma – but also as I have experienced in my family law, child welfare, and employment cases in rural Nevada.

As attorneys, we have opportunities to get involved in our communities that can make a tangible difference in people's lives. In the rural areas, this impact is emphasized even more, as there may be increased opportunities and need for our legal skills and insight. Oftentimes, rural lawyers find ourselves handling a diverse caseload that includes everything from commercial litigation, personal injury, and workmen's compensation, to family law and agricultural issues. We are often able to develop even deeper connections with our clients and become trusted advisors within our communities. Some of these opportunities are expanded upon by our article contributors this month, such as Lorena Castenada and Alexandra Rawlings who discuss their work with farmworkers through Nevada Legal Services' Workers' Rights Law Project, and Gian ("John") Brown, who represents rural clients in contracts work.

Of course, there can be a stigma attached to practicing law in a rural area, based oftentimes on the "hype" given to big-city practice and misconceptions about being a "country" lawyer. Some common perceptions or stereotypes associated with rural legal practice include:

- **Limited Opportunities for Career Advancement:** Some may view practicing law in rural areas as limiting career advancement opportunities compared to urban legal practice. This perception may stem from the belief that rural areas have fewer high-profile cases, corporate clients, or specialized legal work. The truth is that in rural areas, young attorneys may advance to their first trial or evidentiary hearing within their first several months. Many attorneys in the rurals are able to open their own practices almost immediately due to less competition or increased support from other local practitioners.
- **Isolation and Lack of Resources:** Rural legal practitioners may face challenges related to isolation and lack of access to resources such as legal libraries, professional networks, and continuing education opportunities. Did you

know in Elko we now have three Starbucks? All jokes aside, with online resources such as the state bar's benefit of free legal research and online CLE access, this perceived "isolation" is diminishing.

- **Financial Considerations:** Some may assume that practicing law in rural areas is less financially rewarding compared to urban practice. Again, this perception is not necessarily true, as those of us in the rural areas are rarely looking for work as the cases tend to flow in – with sometimes little to no advertising.

Most lawyers and judges in rural areas find fulfillment and success in rural practice, enjoying the close-knit communities, diverse caseloads, and opportunities to make a meaningful impact on people's lives.

Additionally, practicing law in rural areas can offer unique advantages, such as a better work-life balance, lower cost of living, and the opportunity to build strong relationships with clients and community members.

This may be another misperception, but practicing law in rural areas appears to also offers various wellness benefits that may not be as readily available in urban legal practice. For example, I enjoy sitting on my back porch watching the sunsets and sunrises and the weather roll in over the Ruby Mountains with no airplanes flying overhead. But as attorneys, we all deal with the stress of clients, opposing counsel, and deadlines – something that we learn to manage and hopefully can call on our peers or others for guidance or a place to rant.

Here are some other potential "perks" to rural practice:

- **Stronger Sense of Community:** Rural communities tend to have tight-knit social networks where people know and support each other. Lawyers practicing in rural areas may feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their community, which can provide a valuable source of social support and camaraderie. It's true that we often see each other in the grocery

store, at high school graduations, local sports events, etc.

- **Reduced Commute Time:** Lawyers in rural areas may benefit from shorter commute times compared to their urban counterparts. Spending less time commuting can free up more time for leisure activities, relaxation, and spending time with family and friends.
- **Opportunities for Work-Life Balance:** Rural legal practice often allows for greater flexibility in terms of work hours and scheduling. Lawyers may have more control over their workload and be able to strike a better balance between work and personal life, leading to improved overall well-being.
- **Lower Cost of Living:** Rural areas generally have a lower cost of living compared to urban centers. This difference can translate to more affordable housing, lower healthcare costs, and overall reduced financial stress for lawyers practicing in rural areas.
- **Reduced Competition:** In some rural areas, there may be fewer competing law firms, resulting in less pressure to constantly market and compete for clients. This situation can lead to a more relaxed and collaborative professional environment, where lawyers can focus on providing quality legal services without the intense pressure of urban legal markets.

During the past year, as I have traveled to regional and national bar meetings, we often talk about "legal deserts," in the context of rural practice, please join me in thanking Administrator of Courts Katherine Stocks for her contribution to this month's issue in her article involving the far-reaching consequences of Nevada's legal deserts.

In these areas, individuals may face significant barriers to accessing justice due

to the absence of nearby legal professionals or organizations. This lack of access can exacerbate existing inequalities, as those who cannot afford to travel long distances or pay high legal fees may be unable to obtain legal assistance when needed. For example, in some of our rural counties, there may be one attorney in the entire county – and that attorney also happens to be the prosecutor. Individuals must travel from their homes for up to two hours just to meet with an attorney who may be able to take their case. Our legal aid organizations do the best they can, but finding attorneys willing to go out to these communities is difficult, so positions may often go vacant.

Addressing this need requires a multifaceted approach that includes increasing the number of attorneys practicing in underserved areas, expanding access to legal aid services, and implementing policies that reduce barriers to legal representation. Thankfully, we have our Supreme Court, the Access to Justice Commission, the Department of Indigent Defense Services (DIDS), and our Administrator of Courts office all paying special attention to this issue, working with regional and national coalitions to develop approaches that will fulfill these needs.

The bar especially extends its gratitude to the William S. Boyd Law School for its innovative approach to this issue, and Professor Rachel Anderson's article this month describes the law school's work addressing shortages with rural legal services providers in Nevada. Rural practice doesn't necessarily mean you have to move to the rurals either – there are many opportunities to take cases in the rurals through DIDS, legal services providers, or as privately retained counsel – just remember, show civility and respect to all you encounter and read your local rules!

Thank you again for this opportunity to serve as your president. It has been an honor. If you haven't already, make sure to register for the State Bar of Nevada's Annual Bar Conference, which is being held in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As always, should you have any questions or concerns germane to the practice of law and our mission statement, please contact president@nvbar.org.