

Colorado's Underserved Areas & Legal Deserts: Data From Survey Results

Summer 2021

Forty six survey respondents shared their insights and ideas about the accessibility of legal assistance for residents of Greater Colorado. From these surveys, we identified several common themes about projects that have been successful, projects that have not resulted in intended outcomes, obstacles, challenges, and ideas for solutions.

Current Programs and Projects

Successes

- Partnerships with local service providers, non-profits, and other organizations
- Community education efforts and outreach to specific groups like seniors, immigrant communities, and mountain communities
- Programs and clinics on specific topics like landlord-tenant law, evictions, and probate matters
- Events with flexible and hybrid formats (in-person, virtual, or both)
- Events facilitated through local libraries
- Self-Represented Litigant Coordinators (Sherlocks)
- Classes, resources, and support for pro se litigants
- Flyers and pamphlets with information about free and low-cost resources and services
- Colorado Legal Services self-help clinics and revamped intake model

Projects that did not result in the intended outcome

- Events and clinics with low turnout and participation by attorneys and the public
- Virtual events and services that are difficult to access for those without reliable WiFi or phone service
- Metro lawyers assisting in rural areas - locals have more trust in resident attorneys with a stake in the community and familiarity with the unique challenges and local practices

Obstacles and Challenges

- Not enough attorneys living and working in Greater Colorado to meet the legal needs of rural communities**
 - Survey respondents overwhelmingly identified a need for more attorneys in general, as well as multicultural and multilingual attorneys, and those with expertise in areas like tenant defense and probate matters.
 - New attorneys are not incentivized to live and work in rural areas of Colorado because most feel that they can meet their employment needs in the Denver metro area. Further, jobs in the metro area generally pay more, and in many areas of rural Colorado the cost of living is not significantly lower than in the metro area.
- Low participation by attorneys and public at events and clinics**
 - Potential reasons for low participation by the public: lack of accessibility (both for in-person events and virtual events), ineffective marketing, litigants not knowing where to begin looking for resources and services
- The cost of legal representation**
 - For the large number of low-income litigants in rural parties, traditional hourly legal representation is expensive and out-of-reach. There are limited options for free and low-cost representation, like flat-fee, unbundled, reduced fee, and sliding scale.
- Accessibility to Technology**
 - Residents of many rural areas do not have easy access to the technology, reliable WiFi, or cell service necessary to get help through virtual services and resources.
- Distance and Geography**
 - Many service providers in Greater Colorado cover very large areas. Travel times, lack of public transportation, inclement weather, and other realities of traversing rural areas make it difficult for service providers to reach clients for in-person meetings, and vice versa. This also presents challenges for litigants who need to appear in-person in court.

Ideas proposed by survey respondents

Solutions through technology

- More hybrid events to strike a balance between serving those who cannot easily access virtual events because of technology restrictions, and those who cannot easily access in-person events because of transportation challenges
- Ensuring continued access to remote and virtual court proceedings for those who may need it
- Setting up a dedicated space with a computer for litigants to access legal services virtually, in a public location like a library, courthouse, medical center, or senior center
- Creating a video library that pro se litigants can access and watch the learn about important aspects of the court system and their lawsuits
- Creating a map of legal service providers in the state in order to more easily identify existing gaps

Bringing more attorneys to Greater Colorado

- Collaborative, community-wide efforts to recruit new attorneys to places outside the Denver metro area, and incentivize living and working in Greater Colorado
- A program in which established local legal practitioners host new attorneys in order to introduce them to the community, break down barriers, and establish trust and familiarity within the community
- Scholarships or programs for law students interested in practicing outside the metro area

Service areas

- Targeting outreach to specific high-need regions (specifically mentioned by respondents: Eagle County, Otero County, Jackson County, Grand County)
- Hiring more Colorado Legal Services staff to increase ability to serve more litigants in more locations
- Monthly visits to mountain communities and remote areas

Other ideas

- Transportation services
- Trainings, flyers, and pamphlets to be made available for those do not have access to virtual services
- More clinics and events related to specific legal topics like collections defense, probate advice, and landlord-tenant
- Better ways to connect attorneys already living and practicing in rural areas