



AMC 2026

Session 5

**Challenges & Solutions to
Access to Justice Issues in
Wisconsin**

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About the Presenters...

Jeff Brown is the Grants Program Manager at the Wisconsin Trust Account Foundation (WisTAF) where he supports the foundation's efforts to invest in justice for all. Jeff also provides staff support for the Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission (WisATJ). In his WisATJ role, he serves as the state administrator for Wisconsin Free Legal Answer and coordinates the commission's systems change efforts. He previously served as the Pro Bono Program Manager at the State Bar of Wisconsin for over 18 years, where he led efforts to recruit, retain and recognize volunteer lawyers. In that role, he worked with individual attorneys, bar associations, law firms, corporate legal departments, and civil legal aid programs to expand the delivery of pro bono legal services by Wisconsin lawyers. Jeff staffed the State Bar's Access to Justice Study Committee and assisted in the production of its March 2007 report, *Bridging the Justice Gap: Wisconsin's Unmet Legal Needs*. Jeff is a native Detroitier who graduated from the University of Michigan and Harvard Law School.

Dean R. Dietrich is a shareholder with Weld Riley, S.C., has represented clients in the areas of lawyer ethics and professional responsibility for more than 45 years. Dean has served as Chair of the State Bar Committee on Professional Ethics in addition to past service on the Committee appointed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court to review changes to the Wisconsin Rules of Professional Conduct for Attorneys. Dean currently serves as Past President of the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Judge Thomas Hruz has served on District III of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals since September 2014. Previously, he was a shareholder at a law firm where his practice focused on civil litigation, with an emphasis on appellate work. Judge Hruz received his B.A. from UW-Milwaukee, summa cum laude, his M.P.A. from UW-Madison, and his J.D. from Marquette University, magna cum laude. He served as a law clerk for Judge John Coffey of U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit and for Justice David Prosser of Wisconsin Supreme Court. Hruz is active in many bar associations and other law-related organizations, including the Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission.

Amber Rumpf is the Deputy Trial Division Director with the Wisconsin State Public Defender. Attorney Rumpf has been with the SPD since 2015. Prior to joining the SPD, Attorney Rumpf was in private practice and handled criminal cases.

Kristine M. Slonski is an Assistant Director of Litigation and Advocacy for Legal Action of Wisconsin. Her previous position was as Director of Advocacy and Legal Services at Judicare Legal Aid. She first joined Judicare in July 2018 in the newly created position of Litigation Director. During her tenure, Kristin developed and led a program to train and use non-attorney advocates to assist unrepresented litigants in the areas of family, housing, and public benefits cases. Prior to working for legal aid, Kristin was an attorney in private practice focused on housing and consumer litigation matters. Kristin also served as adjunct faculty at University of Wisconsin, Steven's Point, teaching introduction to law classes. Before moving to Wisconsin to be closer to family, Kristin served for two years as a judicial clerk for the Honorable J. Phil Gilbert, United States District Judge for the Southern District of Illinois. Kristin is actively engaged in her community, serving as Alderperson on the Wausau City Council and volunteering with the Wausau school district and Junior Achievement.

Judge Michael D. Zell was appointed to the Portage County Circuit Court by Governor Tony Evers in 2022. With a legal career spanning nearly three decades, Judge Zell brings a rare and comprehensive perspective to the bench, having served as a public defender, a private practitioner, and a prosecutor. Judge Zell began his career in 1998 as an Assistant Public Defender in Racine, Wisconsin. In 2003, he founded Zell Law Office LLC, where he spent 13 years managing a diverse practice encompassing criminal appeals, child welfare, family law, and bankruptcy. His commitment to public service later led him to the District Attorney's office, where he served for six years before returning to the State Public Defender's office in 2021 to handle high-level felony litigation. Throughout his tenure in the justice system, Judge Zell has evolved from a driven litigator into a jurist who prioritizes the human element of the law. He believes that legal competence and diligence must be paired with an understanding of the "spark of life" in every individual. Judge Zell is dedicated to ensuring that the courtroom is a place of both rigorous legal standards and meaningful human connection.

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This panel will discuss . . .

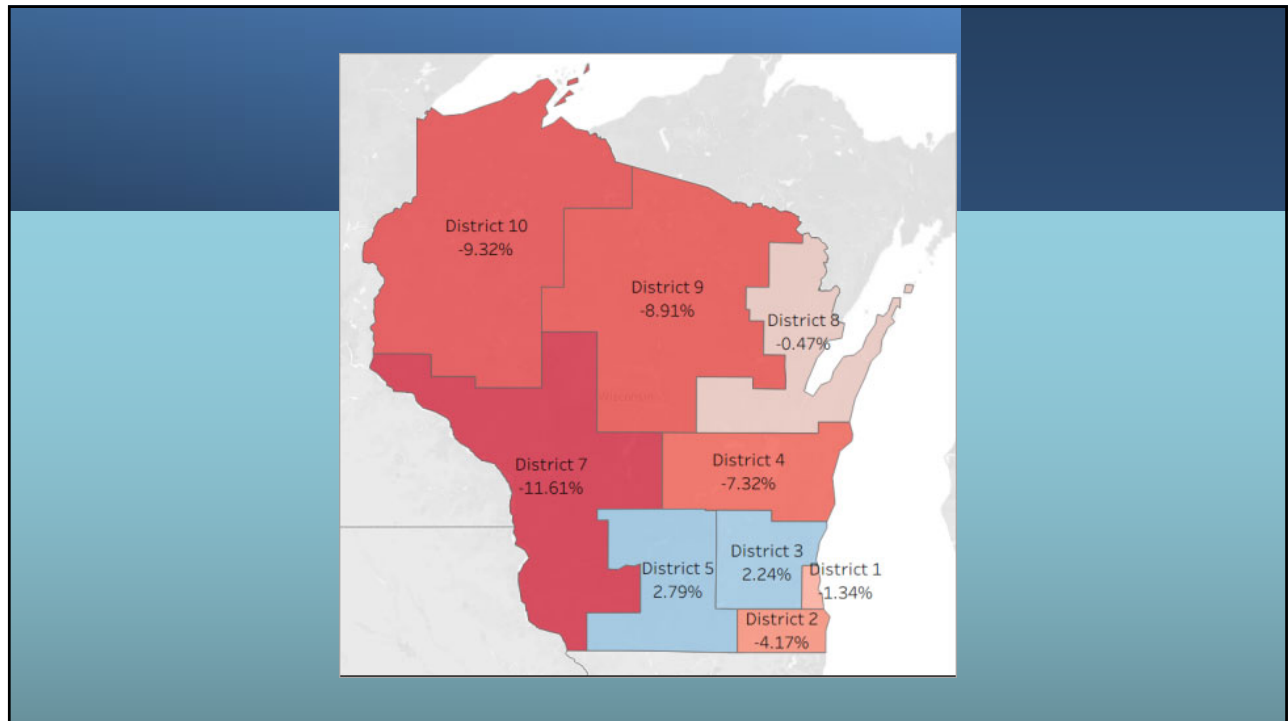
- The **current issues** with the disparate availability of attorneys across parts of Wisconsin.
- **Ongoing efforts** by the State Bar, attorney groups & local bar associations, our law schools, and the state courts.
- **Current reforms**, with perspectives from the Wisconsin State Bar and Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission leaders, the Public Defenders Office, and civil legal aid providers.
- **Your** questions, comments and concerns.

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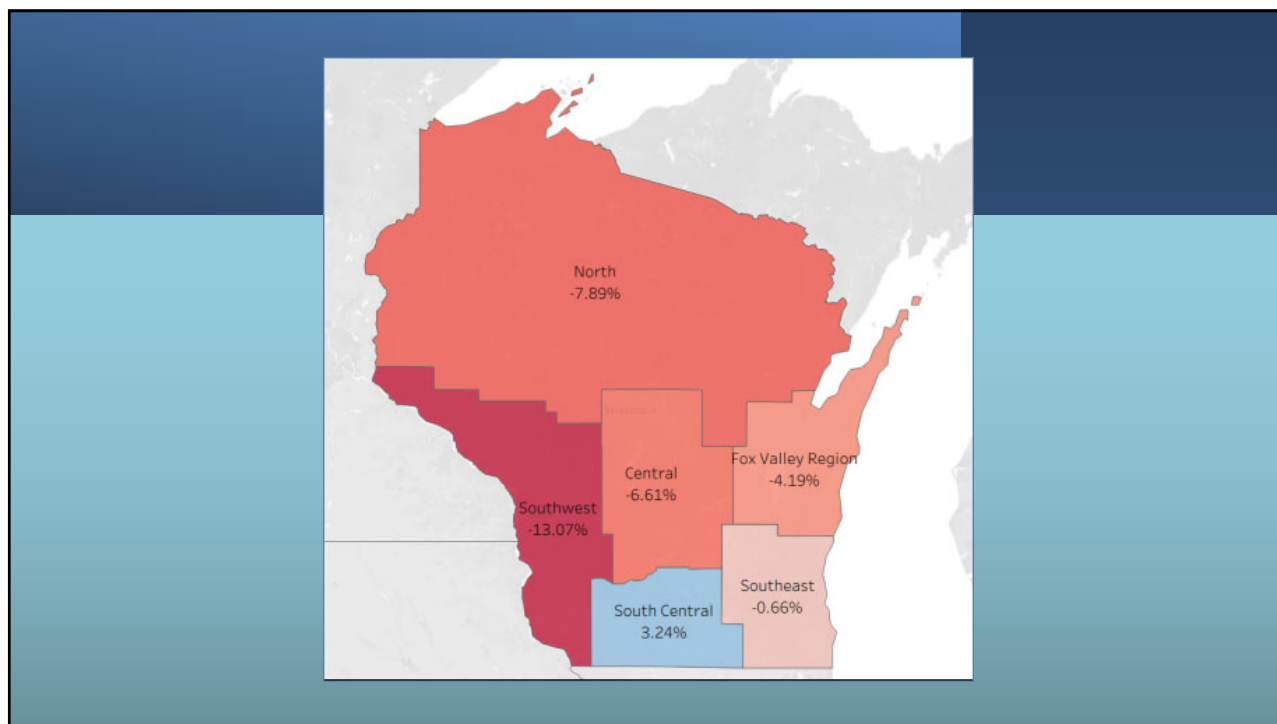
Change in Number and Percent of Active Attorneys by Judicial District, 2020 - 2025

Judicial District	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Percent change 2020 - 2025
District 1	4,418	4,374	4,349	4,343	4,324	4,359	-1.3%
District 2	552	539	544	541	530	529	-4.2%
District 3	1,697	1,702	1,679	1,681	1,689	1,735	2.2%
District 4	642	628	592	590	599	595	-7.3%
District 5	3,256	3,256	3,270	3,260	3,307	3,347	2.8%
District 7	491	469	441	433	425	434	-11.6%
District 8	845	838	844	848	829	841	-0.5%
District 9	606	590	581	566	563	552	-8.9%
District 10	633	616	600	585	592	574	-9.3%
Total	13,140	13,012	12,900	12,847	12,858	12,966	-1.3%

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1. Improve the availability of attorneys in high-need areas.

a. Create a financial incentive program to encourage more attorneys to live and work in high-need areas.

Implementation Lead: Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission or one of its subcommittees.

Implementation Mechanism: After devising potential program parameters and participants, identify possible legislative language and anticipated budget allocations that would be needed to establish and fund a pilot project or full-scale program. The group may also explore GAL training standards to determine if changes to minimum qualifications would free up attorneys to perform other work.

b. Seek an increase in the hourly rate for private attorneys who accept State Public Defender case appointments.

Implementation Lead: Office of the State Public Defender.

Implementation Mechanism: Biennial budget request.

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2. Increase the overall supply of attorneys in Wisconsin.

a. Consider adoption of the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE) in Wisconsin.

Done: March 24, 2026 Supreme Court Order granting Rule Petition No. 25-04, In Re Amendment of SCR 40.04 and 40.14, Relating to the Wisconsin Bar Examination.

b. Expand paths for legal training and education.

Implementation Lead: TBD. The Committee recommends creation of a statewide task force to expand legal education opportunities, including a focus on rural and northern areas of the state.

Implementation Mechanism: TBD. Implementation will vary based on the composition of the task force and what priorities are identified.

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3. Increase access to legal services provided by non-attorney professionals.

a. Study the feasibility of establishing a limited license practitioner (LLP) program to provide legal services in specific, non-criminal practice areas.

Implementation Lead: Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission Subcommittee on Systems Change, with input from the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Implementation Mechanism: Creation of an LLP program in Wisconsin would require changes and adherence to the SCRs, clarify oversight, define continuing education requirements, revise certain attorney ethical requirements, and define tasks allowable for LLPs to undertake.

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4. Utilize existing legal resources as efficiently as possible.

- a. **Promote and expand the use of remote technology for certain routine, non-evidentiary court proceedings.**

Implementation Lead: Director of State Courts.

Implementation Mechanism: Continued training and support for judges and court staff.



WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT
ATTORNEY
RECRUITMENT AND
RETENTION
COMMITTEE

Report and Recommendations



NOVEMBER 2025



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Background and Summary

In June 2024, the Wisconsin Supreme Court formed a committee to examine the shortage of attorneys, the Attorney Recruitment and Retention Committee (the Committee). As outlined in the media release announcing the Committee's creation, the lack of attorneys not only impacts the constitutional rights of defendants but also affects victims and other members of the community as they await justice.¹ The Committee was asked to examine the overall shortage of attorneys and the uneven distribution of attorneys across the state and identify potential solutions.

The Committee drew from a wide range of stakeholders and met seven times between September 2024 and September 2025. In addition, two workgroups convened separately to discuss (1) financial incentive programs and (2) limited legal practitioner programs. Workgroup findings were presented to the full Committee in February 2025 (financial incentives) and April 2025 (limited legal practitioners). Committee and workgroup members are listed in Appendix A.

This report summarizes information discussed by the Committee over the course of its meetings. It also includes several data elements to provide additional context. After reviewing a range of challenges and potential strategies to address the attorney shortage, the Committee recommends further exploration of the following topics, which fall into four strategy areas:

- 1. Improve the availability of attorneys in high-need areas.**
 - a. Create a financial incentive program to encourage more attorneys to live and work in high-need areas.
 - b. Seek an increase in the hourly rate for private attorneys who accept State Public Defender case appointments.
- 2. Increase the overall supply of attorneys in Wisconsin.**
 - a. Expand paths for legal training and education, including programs that focus on rural and northern areas of the state.
 - b. Consider adoption of the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE) in Wisconsin.
- 3. Increase access to legal services provided by non-attorney professionals.**
 - a. Study the feasibility of establishing a limited license practitioner (LLP) program to provide legal services in specific, non-criminal practice areas.
- 4. Utilize existing legal resources as efficiently as possible.**
 - a. Promote and expand the use of remote technology for certain routine, non-evidentiary court proceedings.

It is important to note that not every Committee member supported all of the recommendations in this report or concurred in all aspects of it. However, there was general agreement regarding the scope and complexity of the problem, and acknowledgement that more than one strategy may be needed to bring about positive change. Each of these recommendations is described in greater detail in the following pages, as well as potential mechanisms for implementation. It is anticipated that further fact-finding and exploration of the advantages, disadvantages, and ultimate feasibility of each recommendation as a means to address the attorney shortage will be undertaken by each *implementation lead* identified in the report. Finally, the Committee proposes reconvening in 12 months to assess progress and identify additional resources or strategies that may be needed.

¹ "Chief Justice Establishes Committee to Address Attorney Shortage," June 6, 2024, at <https://www.wicourts.gov/news/archives/view.jsp?id=1649&year=2024>

Issue Overview

Framing the Attorney Shortage Issue

Several data elements outlined below help illustrate the complex nature and broad impact of the attorney shortage. While offering a fairly narrow view of the issue, largely as seen through the lens of the Court System, this information points to the need for both short- and long-term strategies to reverse the current downward trend in the number of attorneys, and in particular, the decline in the number of criminal defense attorneys. Key points include the following:

1. **The majority (73%) of Wisconsin’s attorneys reside in Judicial Districts 1, 3, and 5, which account for 45% of the state’s population.**² These three districts include Milwaukee County, the metropolitan Milwaukee region, and Dane County.
2. **There are fewer attorneys in Wisconsin now than in 2020.** The number of active attorneys in Wisconsin has declined slightly over the past 6 years, dropping just over 1 percent (-1.3%).³ Decreases are centered largely in the state’s northern, central, and southwestern regions.
3. **There are fewer attorneys working on circuit court cases, in general.** The number of unique attorneys associated with Wisconsin Circuit Court cases declined by almost 10 percent (-9.8%) between 2017 and 2024.⁴
4. **Fewer defense attorneys are handling more criminal felony cases.** The number of criminal defense attorneys in circuit court cases decreased by more than 14% (-14.2%) from 2017 to 2024. During the same period, the number of criminal felony cases increased by almost 14%.⁵
5. **State Bar admissions are insufficient to maintain the current level of attorneys in Wisconsin.** Despite consistent or larger class sizes at Wisconsin’s two law schools, as well as higher admission numbers to the State Bar of Wisconsin during the past 5 years, the number of new attorneys is not sufficient to offset those who retire, leave the state, or exit the practice of law for other reasons.

Attorney Supply: National and Regional Context

According to the American Bar Association’s (ABA) *Profile of the Legal Profession 2024*, there are more than 1.3 million lawyers in the United States.⁶ This translates to just under 4 attorneys (3.9) per 1,000 residents, on average. There is no national standard for how many attorneys a state should have, due to state-level variations in population, geographic features, demographic characteristics, and legal codes. Attorney numbers range from a high of 9.6 lawyers per 1,000 population in New York to a low of 2.1 attorneys per 1,000 in Idaho, Arizona, and South Carolina.

² U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties in Wisconsin: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024” (CO-EST2024-POP-55) at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html> and State Bar of Wisconsin.

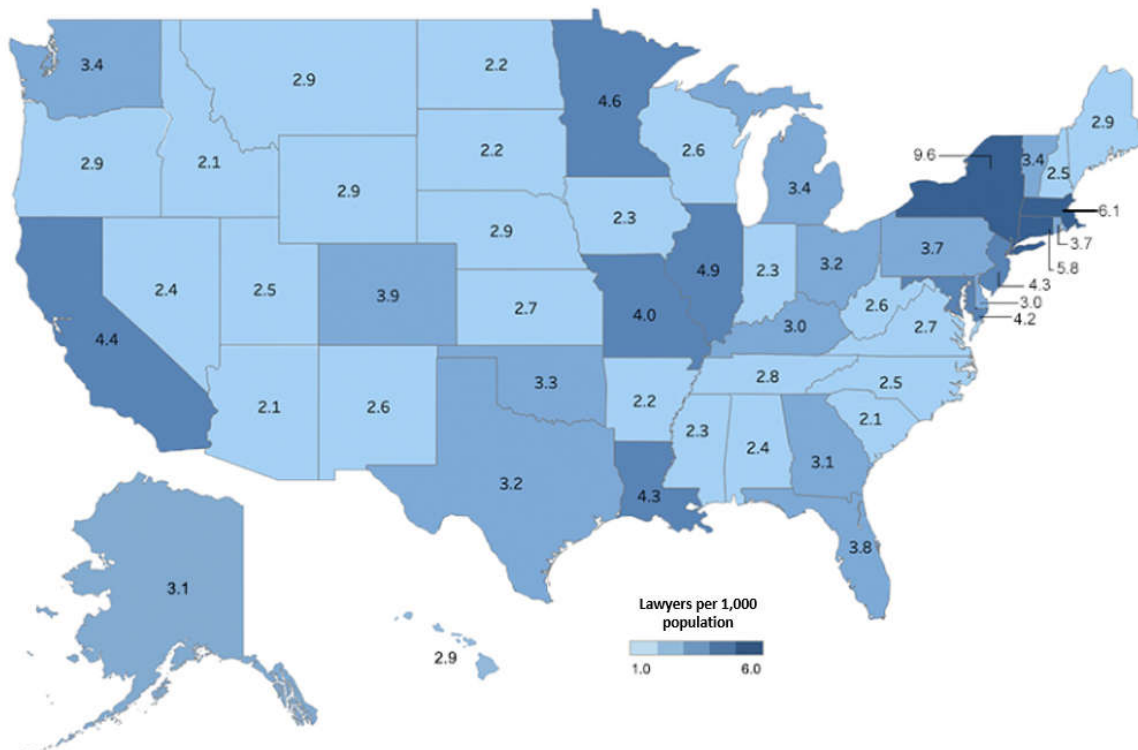
³ Includes Active, Active New, and Senior Active attorney license categories. Does not include Emeritus Active Legacy.

⁴ Source: Wisconsin Court System, Court Operations Data and Analytics Unit. “Year” denotes the year in which a case was disposed, or closed, in the Circuit Court.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2024,” at: <https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/>

Map 1: Attorneys per 1,000 Population, 2024



Source: American Bar Association *Profile of the Legal Profession 2024*

In 2024, only two states in the Midwest were at or above the national average for the ratio of attorneys to population. The highest proportion is in Illinois, with 4.9 attorneys per 1,000 people and Minnesota, with 4.6 per 1,000 residents. Wisconsin was reported as having 2.6 attorneys per 1,000 people, and Iowa and Indiana both showed 2.3 attorneys per 1,000.⁷ When using the same methodology as the ABA “Profile of the Legal Profession” report, Wisconsin would need to add more than 6,000 attorneys to reach the Midwest average of 3.5 attorneys per 1,000 people.⁸

Table 1: Attorneys Per 1,000 Population (Midwest)

Illinois	4.9
Minnesota	4.6
Michigan	3.4
Ohio	3.2
Wisconsin	2.6
Iowa	2.3
Indiana	2.3

Number and Location of Attorneys in Wisconsin

Among Wisconsin’s active, non-emeritus attorneys, the vast majority are located in Judicial Districts 1, 3, and 5 (Milwaukee County, the suburban Milwaukee region, and the greater Dane County region, respectively).⁹ Combined, these 3 districts contain 45% of the state’s population, but they are home to 73% of the state’s attorneys.¹⁰

⁷ “ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2024,” at: <https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/>

⁸ State Bar of Wisconsin and U.S. Census Bureau “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties in Wisconsin: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024.” Calculation is based on 2024 population and the 2025 number of active attorneys from the State Bar of Wisconsin.

⁹ Wisconsin’s 72 counties are divided into 9 Judicial Administrative Districts. See Appendix B and <https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/offices/map.htm> for more detail.

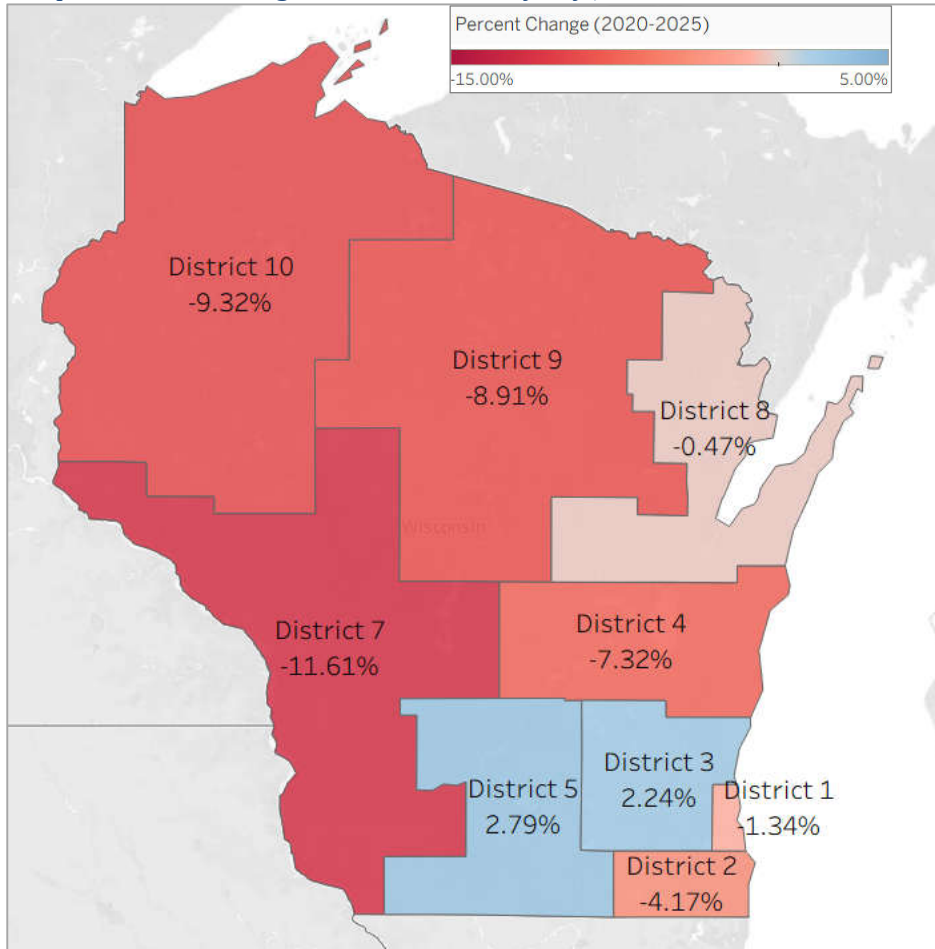
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Table 2: Change in Number and Percent of Active Attorneys by Judicial District, 2020 - 2025

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Source: State Bar of Wisconsin. Includes Active, Active New, and Senior Active member types.

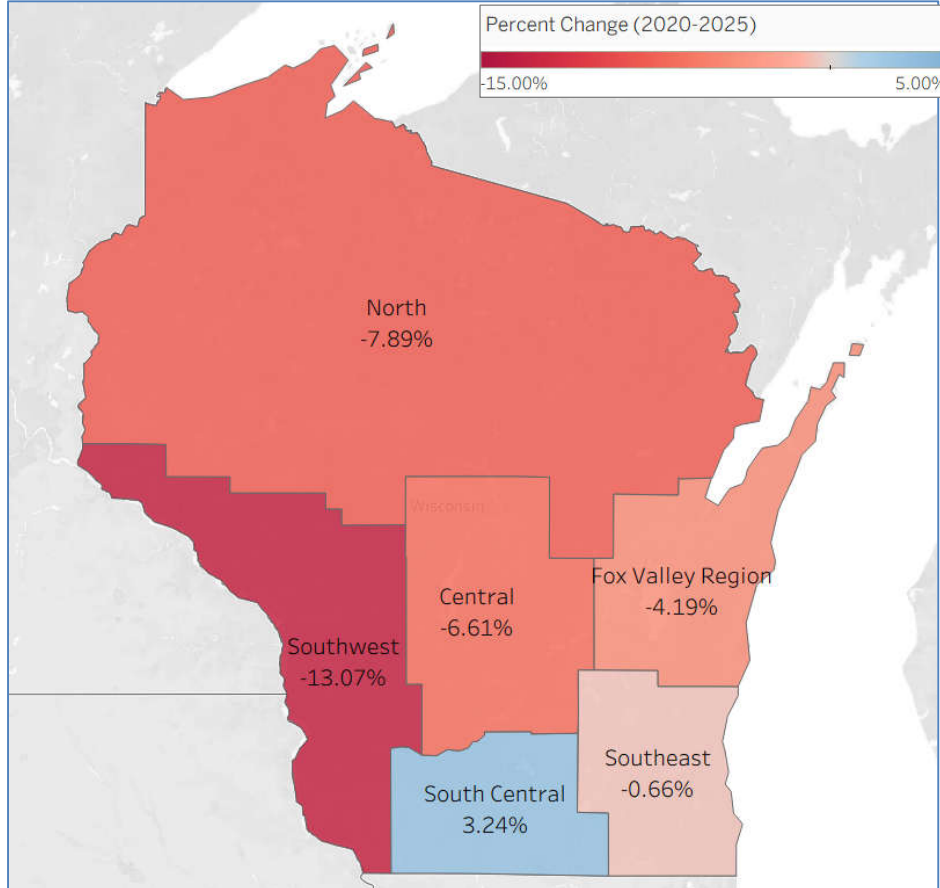
Map 2: Percent Change in Active Attorneys by Judicial District, 2020-2025



Source: State Bar of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Court System, Court Operations Data and Analytics Unit

When viewed through a regional lens, the southwestern and northern areas of the state have experienced the largest declines in active attorneys between 2020 and 2025. The northern region lost almost 8% of its active attorneys, and the southwest region of the state, which includes La Crosse County, saw a decline of over 13% during this period. Most areas of the state, with the exception of the southeast and south central regions, experienced a decline in total attorneys from 2020 to 2025.

Map 3: Percent Change in Active Attorneys by Geographic Region, 2020-2025



Source: State Bar of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Court System, Court Operations Data and Analytics Unit

General Population Trends in Wisconsin

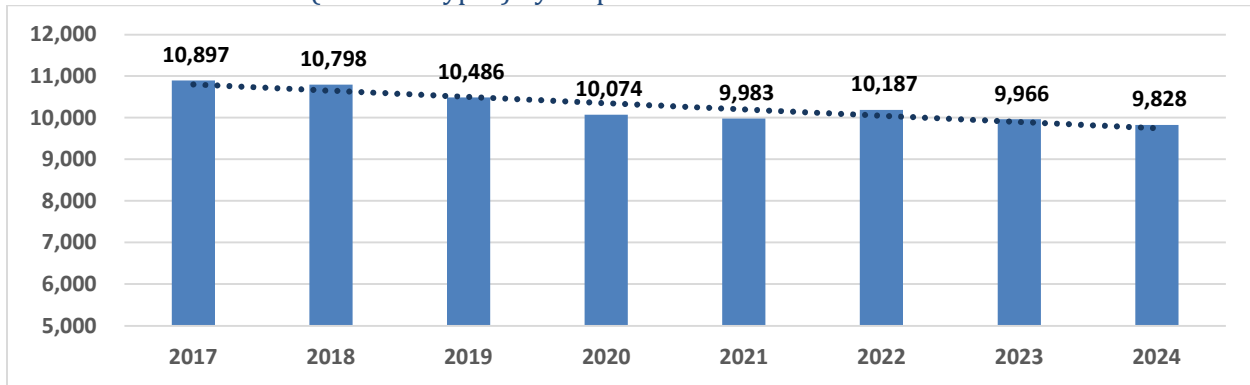
The decline in the number of attorneys is not necessarily reflected in Wisconsin’s general population trends. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, many of the counties where attorney declines were most significant from 2020-2024 saw the largest percent population growth during the same period. Dane County saw the largest growth in the state with an almost 5% increase in residents from 2020-2024, followed by Lafayette County. However, 8 of the remaining top 10 counties with population growth are located in the northern and southwest regions of the state.¹¹ This includes St. Croix, Sawyer, Burnett and Bayfield Counties in District 10, Vilas and Forest Counties in District 9, and Adams and Pepin Counties in District 7. This divergence between general population and attorney levels underscores the need to consider both current and anticipated population levels when developing strategies to improve attorney recruitment and retention.

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Counties in Wisconsin: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024” (CO-EST2024-POP-55) at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-counties-total.html>.

Circuit Court Case and Attorney Trends

The total number of active attorneys associated with circuit court cases of any type (felony, misdemeanor, etc.), has decreased by about 10% over the past eight years, dropping from 10,897 attorneys in 2017 to 9,828 in 2024.¹² This includes attorneys associated with a case at any point, counted when the case concludes.¹³

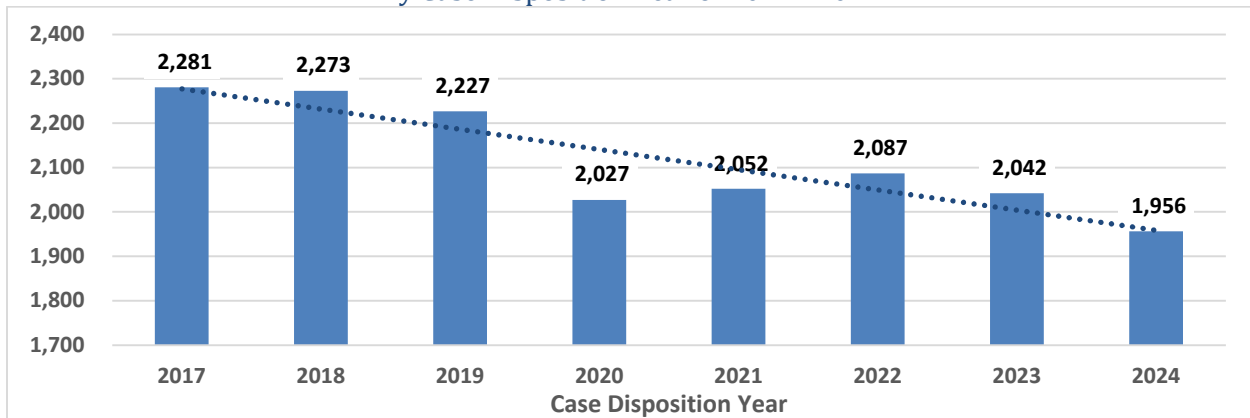
Chart 1: Unique Attorneys Associated with Circuit Court Cases (All Case Types) by Disposition Year of 2017 - 2024



Source: Wisconsin Court System, Court Operations Data and Analytics Unit

The trend between 2017 and 2024 among defense attorneys in criminal felony cases shows a more rapid decline. For cases that closed between 2017 and 2024, the number of unique attorneys serving as defense counsel in felony cases decreased from 2,281 attorneys to under 1,956 attorneys, a reduction of over 14% (-14.2%). During the same period, the number of criminal felony case dispositions increased from around 40,000 in 2017 to over 45,500 cases disposed in 2024, a 14% increase.¹⁴

Chart 2: Unique Defense Attorneys in Criminal Felony Cases (Defense Atty. Only) By Case Disposition Year of 2017 - 2024



Source: Wisconsin Court System, Court Operations Data and Analytics Unit

¹² Wisconsin Court System Data and Analytics Unit. Counts are based on disposition year, not filing year, and include all attorneys associated with a particular case at any point from filing through disposition. Case disposition may fall in a different year than the year in which the case was originally filed.

¹³ Ibid. The number of total case dispositions (for all case types) from 2017 to 2024 decreased by almost 16%, from around 864,000 circuit court cases disposed in 2017 to approximately 728,000 cases disposed in 2024.

¹⁴ Wisconsin Court System Data and Analytics Unit. Data includes defense counsel in criminal felony cases by disposition year. Multiple attorneys associated with a case are counted in the year in which the case disposed (concluded).

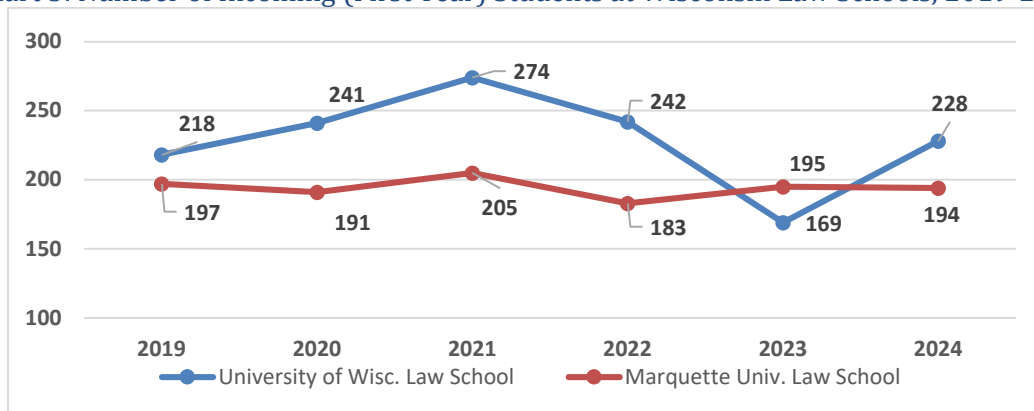
With fewer total attorneys serving as criminal defense attorneys, and more criminal felony cases, this translates to higher per-attorney workloads for prosecutors and defense attorneys working on these cases. According to both prosecutor and State Public Defender representatives on the Committee, high workload and low pay were the most cited reasons for leaving these positions. Although SPD attorney turnover and vacancies peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic, hiring has largely rebounded due to increases in base pay, pay progression, and salary parity with prosecutors over several consecutive state budget cycles.¹⁵

Among prosecutors, high turnover is a persistent issue. In January 1990, prosecutors became state employees. In the ensuing years, state budgets have not created new positions at sufficient levels to account for demographic changes, and pay progression has not kept pace with inflation.¹⁶ As a result, career prosecutors’ salaries tend to be lower than those of newly-hired prosecutors with similar experience. In addition to high caseloads, the increased prevalence of electronic evidence often leads to a longer and more complex discovery process. In 2024, among the state’s 456 prosecutors, 60% had under 10 years of experience, and 40% had fewer than 5 years of experience. The large proportion of prosecutors with fewer than 5 years of experience exemplifies this high rate of turnover.

Wisconsin Law School Enrollment Trends

Wisconsin’s two law schools, Marquette University Law School, and the University of Wisconsin Law School together produce a large proportion of the attorneys practicing in Wisconsin. Marquette Law School’s class size has remained relatively steady between 2014 and 2024, with around 200 students per year. Just under 80% of Marquette University Law School students accepted positions in Wisconsin following graduation (class of 2023). Among the class of 2024, 22 reported jobs in government service (not including clerkships), and 17 took public interest positions.¹⁷ Government service includes positions as prosecutors, and Office of the State Public Defender positions fall under the public interest category.

Chart 3: Number of Incoming (First Year) Students at Wisconsin Law Schools, 2019-2024



Source: American Bar Association

¹⁵ The 2025-27 biennial budget added 12.5 SPD positions, including 11 program support and 1.5 staff attorney positions. See 2025 Wisconsin Act 15, at

https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/budget/2025_27_biennial_budget

¹⁶ Ibid. The 2025-27 budget created 42 new general purpose revenue (GPR) prosecutor positions. In addition, Milwaukee County added 12.5 new prosecutor positions, supported by traffic fine and forfeiture revenue. New prosecutors were apportioned across 24 counties in order to reach approximately 80% workload statewide, as outlined by a workload study provided by the Wisconsin District Attorneys’ Association.

¹⁷ American Bar Association Required Employment Outcome Disclosures, at

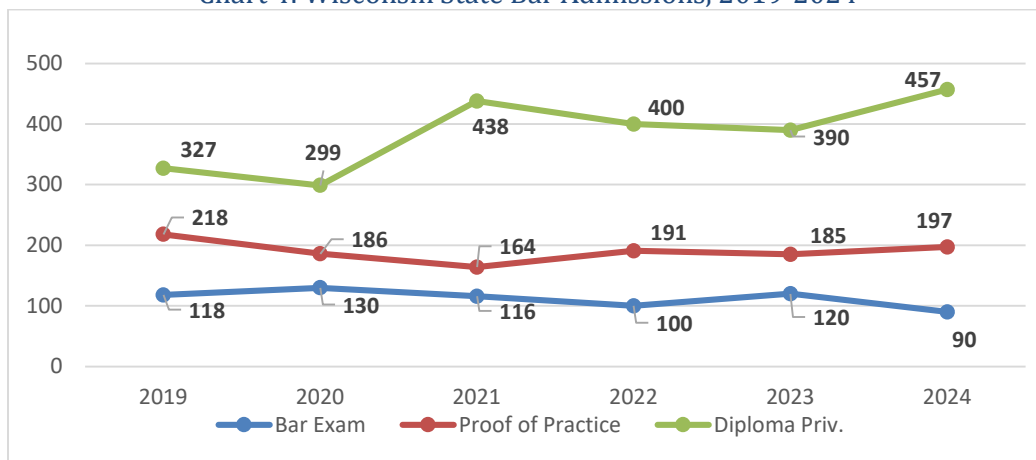
<https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/employmentOutcomes>

Average class sizes at the University of Wisconsin Law School averaged 229 students between 2019 and 2024. This is significantly larger than the average of 184 students between 2014 and 2018, marking a 24% increase in average class size. For the class of 2023, more than 60% of University of Wisconsin Law School graduates accepted jobs in Wisconsin. Among the class of 2024, 44 entered government service (not including clerkships), and 31 accepted public interest positions, which include SPD attorneys.¹⁸

Attorneys Admitted to Practice Law in Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners oversees admission to the state bar through examination (taking the bar exam) or through demonstrating proof of practice in another state. In addition, qualified graduates of the state’s two law schools may apply for admission through diploma privilege. Eligible graduates are admitted pending completion of character and fitness investigations. Through these three channels for admission, 744 attorneys were admitted to the Wisconsin State Bar in 2024. This marks a 22 percent increase in admissions when compared to 2019.¹⁹

Chart 4: Wisconsin State Bar Admissions, 2019-2024



Source: Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners

As of October 2025, the State Bar of Wisconsin had approximately 26,000 total members.²⁰ In addition to active attorney types, this figure includes inactive, judicial, and emeritus members who do not take cases.²¹ The 2025 total also includes more than 9,200 out-of-state members. Among those attorneys who reside in Wisconsin and fall into the categories of active, active new, and senior active, there are just under 13,000 members (12,966).

¹⁸ American Bar Association Required Employment Outcome Disclosures, at <https://www.abarequireddisclosures.org/employmentOutcomes>

¹⁹ Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners Annual Reports, available at <https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/offices/bbe.htm>

²⁰ State Bar of Wisconsin.

²¹ Supreme Court Rule Petition 20-06 raised the age at which attorneys move into the Emeritus license category and clarified that moving forward, Emeritus denotes inactive attorneys. A small proportion of attorneys who reached 70 as of July 1, 2021 were granted legacy status (Emeritus Active Legacy) and are subject to active attorney licensing rules as long as they continue to practice. Attorneys may continue to elect Emeritus status at age 70 and become inactive. Active attorneys who reach 75 after July 1, 2021 may continue to practice through a Senior Active license category. See Supreme Court Rule 20-06.

Proposed Strategy Areas and Recommendations for Further Exploration

Given the significant decline in the number of attorneys in some areas of the state, the increase in criminal felony cases, and state bar admission levels, maintaining current practices will not close the attorney gap in Wisconsin. On the contrary, without intervention, the attorney shortage will worsen.

Based on Committee meeting presentations, discussions, and additional materials prepared by topic-specific workgroups, the Committee recommends further exploration of four strategy areas with a total of six recommendations. Several of these recommendations have been shown to be effective in other states and may be replicable in Wisconsin. Over the course of its meetings, the Committee did not have the opportunity to explore the full range of advantages and disadvantages of each recommendation, or to estimate the impact each recommendation is likely to have on the supply and distribution of attorneys in the state. As a result of this incomplete analysis, not all Committee members endorsed the individual strategies outlined below.

Strategy Area 1: Improve availability of attorneys, particularly in high-need areas.

Recommendation 1-A: Create a financial incentive program to encourage more attorneys to live and work in high-need areas.

The concept of a financial incentive program to encourage attorneys to relocate to rural and high-need areas of the state is not new to Wisconsin. Similar approaches have been deployed to address shortages of medical professionals and teachers in many areas of the state. Some states have successfully created financial incentive programs to encourage attorneys to live and work in rural areas. In order to explore these programs in more detail, the Committee formed a financial incentives workgroup. The workgroup convened several times and submitted a report to the full Committee in February 2025.

The workgroup met with representatives from South Dakota and Ohio, two states that have implemented financial incentive programs for attorneys working in rural areas. The South Dakota Rural Attorney Recruitment Program provides direct annual payments to participants who work in a rural area for five years.²² Payments are equivalent to 90% of in-state tuition at the University of South Dakota Law School. As of July 2025, 19 participants have completed the 5-year program, and 14 of these remained in the community where they were placed through the program, representing a 74% retention rate.²³

The State of Ohio also created a program that provides student loan repayment for public attorneys who work for at least 3 and up to 5 years in designated rural counties. The Ohio Rural Practice Incentive Program is open to public attorneys (public defenders or prosecutors) as well as to private attorneys who perform at least 520 hours of work as a court-appointed counsel per year.²⁴ The program began in 2024 with \$1.5 million in state funding. There were 100 applicants for the 55 positions that were filled during the program's initial year of operation.

²² South Dakota Unified Judicial System's Rural Attorney Recruitment Program, at <https://uj.s.sd.gov/for-attorneys/rural-attorney-recruitment-program/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ohio Rural Practice Incentive Program, at <https://highered.ohio.gov/initiatives/workforce-development/rural-practice-incentive-program>

In recognition of the need to improve attorney coverage in rural areas, the State Bar of Wisconsin established a Rural Clerkship Program in 2023 for first- and second-year law students from Wisconsin and Minnesota law schools. In 2024, 25 law students applied for the program, and 16 were placed with public and private employers. In 2025, 61 students applied and 19 were placed, many with regional State Public Defender Offices.²⁵ This program is expected to continue growing as a result of robust interest from both students and employers.

In addition to the Rural Clerkship Program, the State Bar of Wisconsin launched a Rural Practice Development Program in 2024.²⁶ In partnership with the Wisconsin Law Foundation and supported by a private gift, the program will provide incentives to three attorneys who fulfill a two-year commitment to work in counties with 1.1 or fewer lawyers per 1,000 people. Participating attorneys may work in law firms, nonprofit agencies, or government entities. Two of the program's initial three awards in 2025 were for attorneys in Vernon and Oneida Counties.

Existing financial incentive programs for medical professionals and educators in Wisconsin may also serve as models, including the following:

- Primary Care and Psychiatry Shortage Grant: <https://heab.state.wi.us/features/pcps.html>
- Rural Physician Loan Assistance Program: <https://worh.org/resources/for-the-workforce/loan-repayment/>
- Wisconsin Rural Physician Residency Assistance Program: <https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/rural/>
- Wisconsin Rural Ob-Gyn Residency: <https://www.obgyn.wisc.edu/residency/rural>
- Wisconsin Academy for Rural Medicine: <https://www.med.wisc.edu/education/md-program/warm/>
- Wisconsin Teacher Pledge (privately funded): <https://tec.education.wisc.edu/teacher-pledge/>

The Committee recommends examining the structure and funding mechanisms of the South Dakota and Ohio rural attorney incentive programs to determine if a similar program is feasible in Wisconsin. Further, the Committee recommends working in partnership with the State Bar of Wisconsin to complement, and not compete with, its existing rural attorney initiatives. Recent SPD budget requests may provide insight toward development of a pilot program to provide loan repayment assistance for attorneys working in rural areas.²⁷

Implementation Lead: Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission or one of its subcommittees.

Implementation Mechanism: After devising potential program parameters and participants, identify possible legislative language and anticipated budget allocations that would be needed to establish and fund a pilot project or full-scale program. The group may also explore GAL training standards to determine if changes to minimum qualifications would free up attorneys to perform other work.

²⁵ State Bar of Wisconsin Rural Clerkship Program, at <https://www.wisbar.org/aboutus/overview/Pages/RuralClerkshipProgram.aspx>

²⁶ State Bar of Wisconsin Rural Practice Development Program, at <https://www.wisbar.org/aboutus/overview/Pages/RuralPracticeDevelopmentProgram.aspx>

²⁷ See Office of the State Public Defender 2025-2027 Biennial Budget Issue Paper DIN 5018 – Tuition Reimbursement/Loan Assistance, p. 106 at <https://doa.wi.gov/budget/SBO/2025-27%20550%20SPD%20Budget%20RequestNR.pdf>

Recommendation 1-B: Seek an increase in the hourly rate for private attorneys who accept State Public Defender case appointments.

As noted earlier in this report, the distribution of attorneys across the state is uneven, with the majority concentrated in the southeast and Fox Valley regions of the state. For qualifying indigent criminal defense clients, assignments are made by the regional State Public Defender (SPD) office. When outside counsel is required due to a conflict, the SPD relies upon a network of over 900 private bar attorneys who have completed specialized training to become certified. According to the Office of the State Public Defender, private bar attorney appointments are sought in approximately 35-40% of cases.²⁸

Seven counties currently have no SPD-certified attorneys residing within that county, per the Office of the State Public Defender. Although other attorneys in neighboring counties may be certified to work in these counties, they must travel out of their home county to do so. These counties include Adams and Buffalo Counties (District 7 – Southwest Region), Bayfield and Rusk Counties (District 10 – Northern Region), Forest County (District 9 – Northern Region), and Marquette and Waushara Counties (District 4 - Central Region).

The compensation rate for private bar attorneys appointed by the SPD to work on eligible cases was increased from \$70/hour to \$100/hour in 2023. This amount was viewed by many Committee members as too low to cover most private attorneys’ operational costs, particularly if they are required to travel long distances with several hours of travel time. An increase in the hourly rate and travel rate (currently \$50/hour) may encourage more private defense attorneys to accept SPD case appointments. In addition, the potential short- and long-term fiscal impact on state and county budgets as a result of higher pay rates should be examined as part of this effort, including potential increases in county expenses related to Dean appointments.²⁹

Implementation Lead: Office of the State Public Defender.

Implementation Mechanism: Biennial budget request.

Strategy Area 2: Increase the overall supply of attorneys in Wisconsin.

Recommendation 2-A: Explore adoption of the Uniform Bar Exam (UBE) in Wisconsin.

Through diploma privilege, J.D. graduates of Wisconsin’s two law schools may seek admission to the State Bar of Wisconsin without taking the bar exam.³⁰ For attorneys attending law school outside of Wisconsin, they must either take the Wisconsin Bar Exam or be admitted by demonstrating eligible practice in another state, known as proof of practice. All but 11 U.S. states have adopted one or more components of the UBE for bar examination purposes. In its 2024 annual report, the Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners noted that it was reviewing tools offered by the National Conference of Bar Examiners,

²⁸ State Public Defender Assigned Counsel Division, Frequently Asked Questions, at <https://www.wisspd.gov/assigned-counsel-division/faqs/>

²⁹ See *State v. Dean*, 163 Wis. 2d 503, 471 N.W. 2d 310 (1991)

³⁰ Graduates of Wisconsin law schools must comply the Character and Fitness Certification requirements to be admitted to the Wisconsin State Bar.

including the current UBE and the forthcoming “NextGen” exam, which is currently being tested by the National Conference of Bar Examiners.³¹

The potential impact of UBE adoption on the attorney shortage is difficult to estimate. Several states that have adopted the UBE have similar or lower attorney-to-population ratios than Wisconsin.³² However, given that the decline in Wisconsin’s attorneys is most pronounced in areas that border neighboring states, adopting the UBE may expand options for recent graduates from adjacent states to become licensed in Wisconsin more readily.

The Committee supports exploration of additional pathways for admission to the State Bar of Wisconsin. By broadening eligibility through the UBE, Wisconsin may be better able to draw upon the services of attorneys who attended law school outside of Wisconsin.

Implementation Lead: Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners.

Implementation Mechanism: Supreme Court Rule change.

Recommendation 2-B: Expand paths for legal training and education.

This recommendation centers on forming a task force to examine additional paths for legal training, particularly in rural and northern areas of the state. Several law schools offer accelerated *Juris Doctor* (JD) programs, which enable students to complete both undergraduate and law school degree programs within 6 years, instead of the typical 7 years. Other schools offer hybrid models that combine in-person and online programming, which may allow students to continue working full-time while attending law school. This flexibility may enable more non-traditional students to pursue a legal degree while remaining in their home communities.

Several members of the Committee felt strongly about making legal education more accessible to rural and northern residents and allowing more cultivation of “home grown” legal professionals with an understanding of what it means to live and work in these communities. One area of Committee discussion focused on the possibility of establishing a third law school and/or a Wisconsin-based hybrid law program. The Committee did not have the opportunity to explore potential challenges or costs associated with establishing a new law school, nor did it examine the potential for a new program to measurably improve the availability of legal professionals in high-need areas. These considerations should be thoroughly examined by the task force charged with exploring this topic moving forward.

Members of the Committee also acknowledged that recruiting young professionals to work in many high-need regions can be challenging due to a lack of child care, health care, and educational institutions in these areas. Any proposal for expanded training and recruitment efforts, including the financial incentive program outlined above in Recommendation 1-A (creation of a financial incentive program), should consider potential strategies for addressing some of these barriers, if possible.

³¹ Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners 2024 Annual Report, at <https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/offices/docs/bbe24.pdf>.

³² “ABA Profile of the Legal Profession 2024,” at: <https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/> and National Conference of Bar Examiners list of UBE jurisdictions, at <https://www.ncbex.org/exams/ube/list-ube-jurisdictions>

One additional component the Committee discussed related to legal training and education focused on the importance of preparing law students for work in the public sector, including as prosecutors and public defenders. Both of the Wisconsin-based law schools offer clinical and other experiential learning programs that expose students to a wide range of legal work, including public sector and public interest work. The Committee strongly supports the continuation of these programs.

Implementation Lead: To be determined. The Committee recommends creation of a statewide task force to expand legal education opportunities, including a focus on rural and northern areas of the state.

Implementation Mechanism: To be determined. Implementation will vary based on the composition of the task force and what priorities are identified.

Strategy Area 3: Create avenues for non-attorney professionals to provide legal services

Recommendation 3: Study the feasibility of establishing a limited license practitioner (LLP) program to provide legal services in specific, non-criminal practice areas.

The Committee recommends exploration of a limited license practitioner (LLP) program to allow licensed, non-lawyer professionals to provide a narrow scope of civil and family legal services. Several states have established limited license practitioner (LLP) programs, including Minnesota, Colorado, Oregon, Texas, Arizona, and Utah. Georgia is currently exploring creation of an LLP program following a three-year pilot program.³³ These programs feature a range of different structures and oversight mechanisms, but generally include a training and certification program based on a set curriculum, with required continuing legal education credits in order to maintain the license.

By providing legal services to parties in a limited array of civil and family cases, limited license practitioners may help create additional capacity among existing attorneys, allowing them more time to focus on other cases. Limited legal practitioners may also serve the goal of expanded access to justice by providing representation in cases where parties typically proceed without an attorney, such as small claims cases and certain family matters.

Due to the Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission's commitment to expanding civil legal access, it is recommended that the Commission, in coordination with the Wisconsin State Bar, explore a potential LLP program in Wisconsin. In addition, it is recommended that the group incorporate representatives of the State Bar of Wisconsin's Certified Paralegal Program to help ensure structural consistency and clear delineation between the work of certified paralegals and the anticipated work that would be undertaken by LLPs.

Analysis of a potential LLP program may also include a review of current *guardian ad litem* (GAL) requirements to determine the feasibility of allowing LLPs or other non-attorneys to serve in this role. Utilizing other trained professionals as GALs could create additional attorney capacity throughout the state, particularly in the area of family law. Several states, including Minnesota, do not require GALs to be trained attorneys.

³³ "Georgia lawyers consider limited role for legal assistance by non-attorneys" at <https://capitol-beat.org/2025/07/georgia-lawyers-consider-limited-role-for-legal-assistance-by-non-attorneys/>

Implementation Lead: Wisconsin Access to Justice Commission Subcommittee on Systems Change, with input from the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Implementation Mechanism: Creation of an LLP program in Wisconsin would require changes to Supreme Court Rule to codify the program, clarify oversight, define continuing education requirements, revise certain attorney ethical requirements, and define legal tasks that would be allowable for LLPs to undertake. The group should also consider whether licensing fees would be sufficient to support program administration.

Strategy Area 4: Utilize existing legal resources as efficiently as possible.

Recommendation 4: Promote and expand the use of remote technology for certain routine, non-evidentiary court proceedings.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, remote technology provided an alternative, emergency means for allowing courts to remain open to the public despite courthouse closures. Five years later, the role of remote hearing technology in courtrooms has evolved to be more a matter of convenience than of necessity. The Committee recommends that the Director of State Courts actively promote and expand the use of remote hearing technology for court proceedings, as appropriate. Attorneys may be more open to accepting cases outside their home counties if they may appear remotely for certain routine, non-evidentiary court proceedings. The Director of State Courts currently supports training and technical support to ensure that judges and court staff are prepared to use remote technology for court proceedings. It is also important to ensure that all hearing rooms have the necessary equipment (cameras, microphones, speakers, and video displays) and bandwidth to effectively hold remote proceedings.

Some states have implemented policies requiring use of remote technology for certain routine court proceedings, with only minor exceptions.³⁴ Wisconsin circuit court judges retain broad discretion when determining whether to allow the use of remote technology for court proceedings. It may be useful for the Court System to ensure that all judges have sufficient training in this technology, and to ensure that all hearing rooms have adequate equipment and bandwidth to effectively conduct such hearings.

Implementation Lead: Director of State Courts.

Implementation Mechanism: Continued training and support for judges and court staff.

³⁴ The Minnesota Judicial Branch established a policy that delineates which hearing types are to be held in-person and which are to be held remotely. See Minnesota Judicial Branch Policy and Procedures No. 525, Remote & In-person Hearings Policy, at <https://mncourts.gov/media/migration/ciomedialibrary/news-and-public-notice/525-feb2025.pdf>

Conclusion and Next Steps

The information in this report is intended to help define some of the primary factors contributing to the attorney shortage in Wisconsin. However, it is crucial that the impact of the shortage on individuals is not lost. Victims and their families who are awaiting justice, litigants who are seeking an attorney to help with a contested divorce, and criminal defendants waiting months for counsel to be assigned all suffer when there are delays in the justice system caused by a lack of attorneys.

The recommendations in this report are intended to increase the overall supply, capacity, and availability of attorneys in Wisconsin. Additional research, analysis, and collaboration will be necessary to determine the feasibility and potential impact of each proposed strategy. And as noted earlier, while not every Committee member endorsed all of the recommendations included in this report, there was general agreement that a range of simultaneous strategies, including those proven to be successful in other states, may lead to long-term improvement in the supply and availability of attorneys in Wisconsin.

The release of this report coincides with state and national efforts to examine the shortage of attorneys in rural and high-need areas. On October 29, 2025, the Legal Services Corporation's (LSC) Rural Justice Task Force released a report: *Justice Where We Live: Promising Practices from Rural Communities*.³⁵ The LSC report, developed over two years with input from more than 60 task force members, focused on four main challenges: (1) the shortage of attorneys; (2) the digital divide; (3) transportation obstacles to accessing legal help; and (4) community trust. The report suggests the following approaches for addressing the shortage of attorneys in rural areas:

- Highlighting and communicating about the justice gap through task forces and convenings;
- Increasing the number of lawyers in rural and remote communities;
- Expanding opportunities for non-lawyer professionals to help close the rural justice gap;
- Providing support for current and prospective rural practitioners to manage student loan debt;
- Offering training on establishing and running small law practices and funding programs to encourage rural practice; and
- Expanding benefits and programs for rural practitioners, such as reduced bar dues and targeted training focused on succession planning.³⁶

The parallels between the recommendations put forward by the Rural Justice Task Force and those included in this report indicate that the Committee recognized similar challenges, and reached similar conclusions, as those identified by national experts, scholars, and practitioners. The Committee encourages all implementation partners identified in this report to integrate up-to-date research, such as the Rural Justice Task Force report, into their efforts to help address this important issue.

The Committee suggests that a follow-up meeting be scheduled in 12 months to assess progress and determine what additional resources or strategies that may be needed.

³⁵ Legal Services Corporation's Rural Justice Task Force, "Justice Where We Live: Promising Practices from Rural Communities," Full Report at <https://www.lsc.gov/ruralreport>

³⁶ Legal Services Corporation's Rural Justice Task Force, "Justice Where We Live: Promising Practices from Rural Communities" Executive Summary, at <https://lsc-live.app.box.com/s/qcjmp53qk9rc2petyijmq7tb302xz9fv>

Appendix A: Attorney Recruitment and Retention Committee and Workgroup Members

Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice or designee (Chair)

Chief Justice Annette K. Ziegler (September 2024-April 2025)

Chief Justice Ann Walsh Bradley (May-June 2025)

Justice Brian Hagedorn (July-October 2025)

Circuit Court Judges

Judge Guy Dutcher, Waushara County and Chief Judge, 4th Judicial District

Judge Scott Horne, La Crosse County and Chief Judge, 7th Judicial District

Judge Ann Knox-Bauer, Taylor County and Chief Judge, 9th Judicial District

Judge Scott Nordstrand, St. Croix County

Judge Carrie Schneider, Outagamie County and Chief Judge, 8th Judicial District

Judge Jon M. Theisen, Eau Claire County

Access to Justice Commission

Judge Thomas Hruz, Wisconsin Court of Appeals, Dist. III

Deans of Wisconsin Law Schools

Dean Joseph D. Kearney, Marquette University Law School

Dean Daniel Tokaji, University of Wisconsin Law School

State Public Defender or designee

Attorney Katie York, Deputy State Public Defender

President, Wisconsin District Attorney Association or designee

Attorney Melinda Tempelis, Outagamie County District Attorney and President, Wisconsin District Attorneys' Association

Attorneys selected by the President of the State Bar of Wisconsin

Attorney Dean Dietrich, Wausau, WI

Attorney John E. Danner, Minocqua, WI

Attorney Tatiana (Tati) Shirasaki, Managing Attorney, Dodge County District Attorney's Office

Attorneys selected by the Young Lawyers Division of the State Bar of Wisconsin

Attorney Megan E. Lee, Communications & Development Director, Judicare Legal Aid, Wausau

Attorney Stephanie K. Schmidt, Assistant State Public Defender, Hudson

Wisconsin Board or Bar Examiners

Attorney Jacquelynn Rothstein, Director, Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners

District Court Administrator

Thomas Schappa, 8th Judicial Administrative District

Certified Paralegal selected by the State Bar of Wisconsin's Certified Paralegal Program

Aimee B. Bleyer, SBWCP, Plover

State Bar of Wisconsin Liaisons

Attorney Lisa Roys, Director of Advocacy and Access to Justice

Kim Burns, Member Engagement Manager

Committee Staff and Court System Liaisons

Ann Olson, Senior Policy Analyst, Office of Court Operations

Attorney Krista Miller, Senior Legal Advisor, Office of Court Operations

Adam Plotkin, Legislative Liaison & Policy Initiatives Advisor, Wisconsin Director of State Courts Office

Attorney Morgan Young, Chief Legal Counsel to the Chief Justice

Financial Incentives Workgroup

Dean Joseph Kearney, Marquette University Law School

Larry Martin, Executive Director, State Bar of Wisconsin (through September 2025)

Adam Plotkin, Director of Government and Public Affairs, Office of the State Public Defender (through December 2024); Policy Initiatives Advisor and Legislative Liaison, Wisconsin Court System (January 2025 – present)

Atty. Peter Tempelis, Assistant District Attorney, Waukesha County

Dean Daniel Tokaji, University of Wisconsin Law School

Atty. Katie York, Deputy State Public Defender

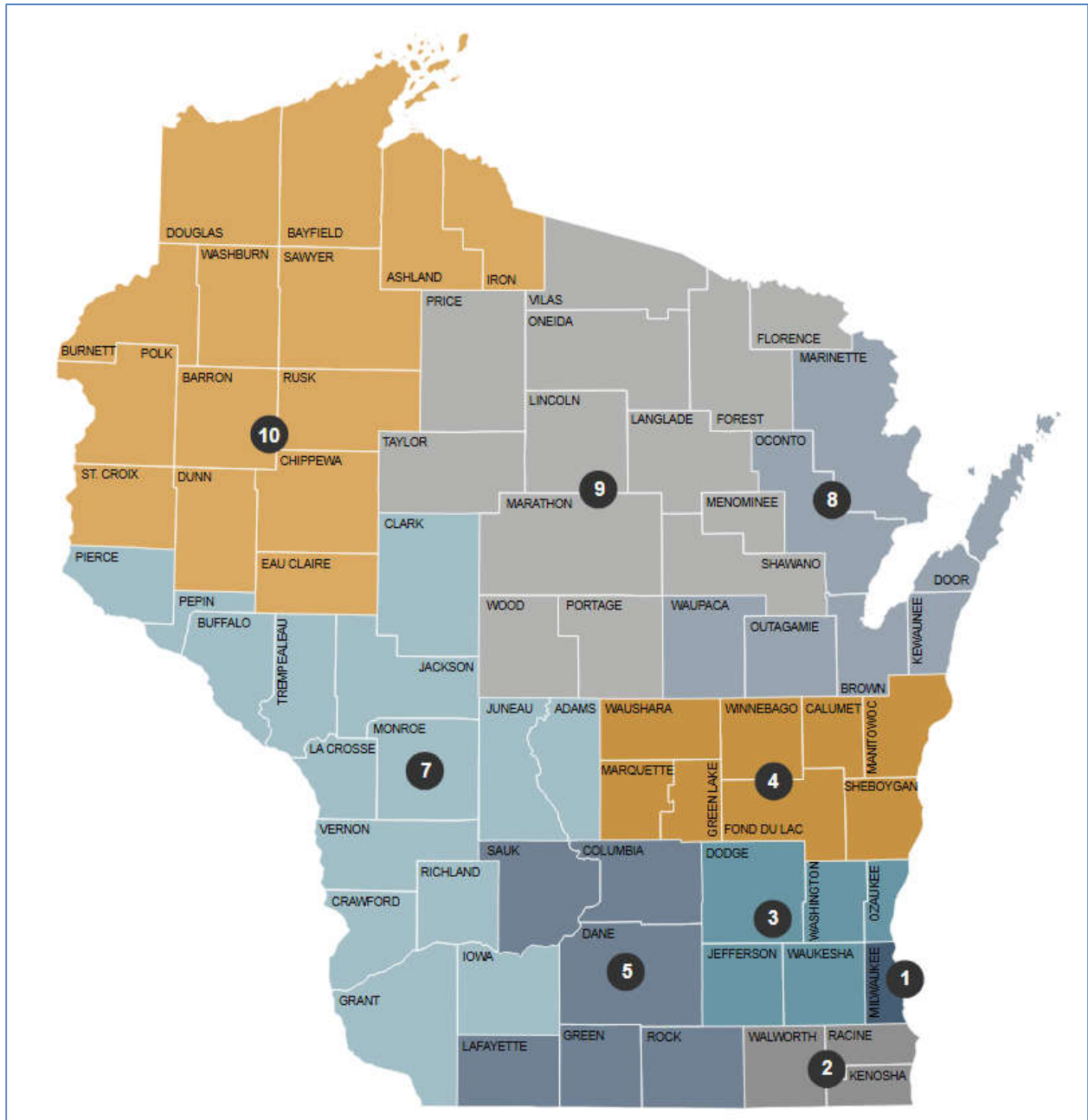
Limited Legal Practitioner (LLP) Programs Workgroup

Atty. Dean Dietrich, Wausau, WI

Judge Jon Theisen, Eau Claire County Circuit Court

Aimee Bleyer, SBWCP, Plover, WI

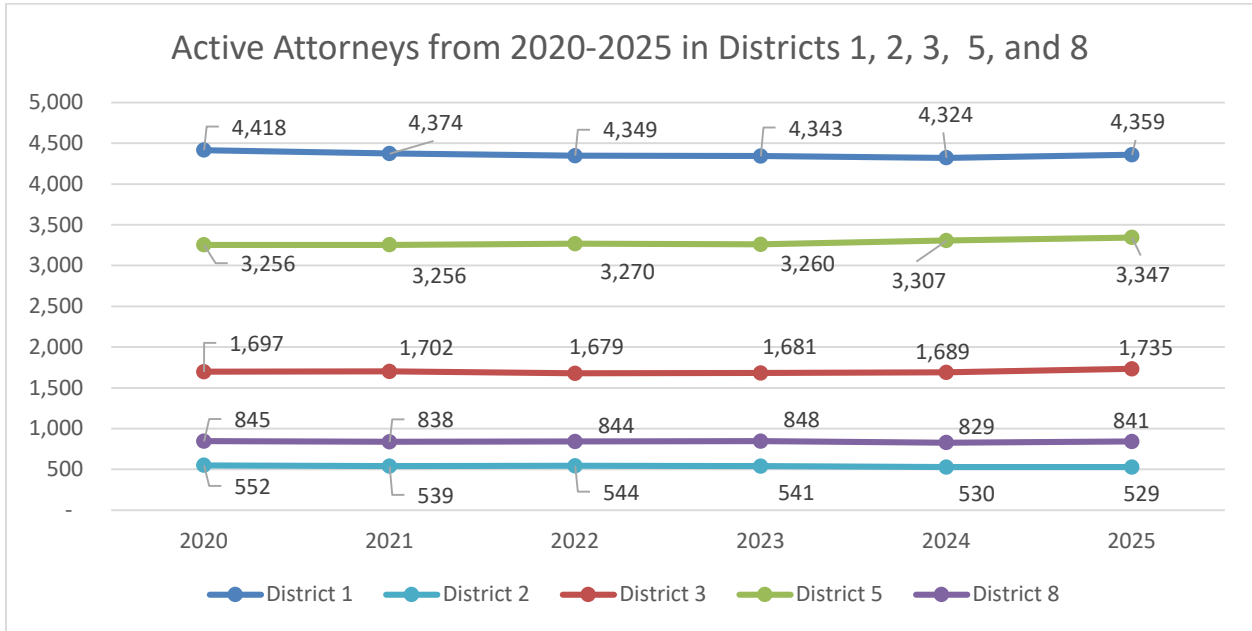
Appendix B: Wisconsin Court System Judicial Administrative Districts



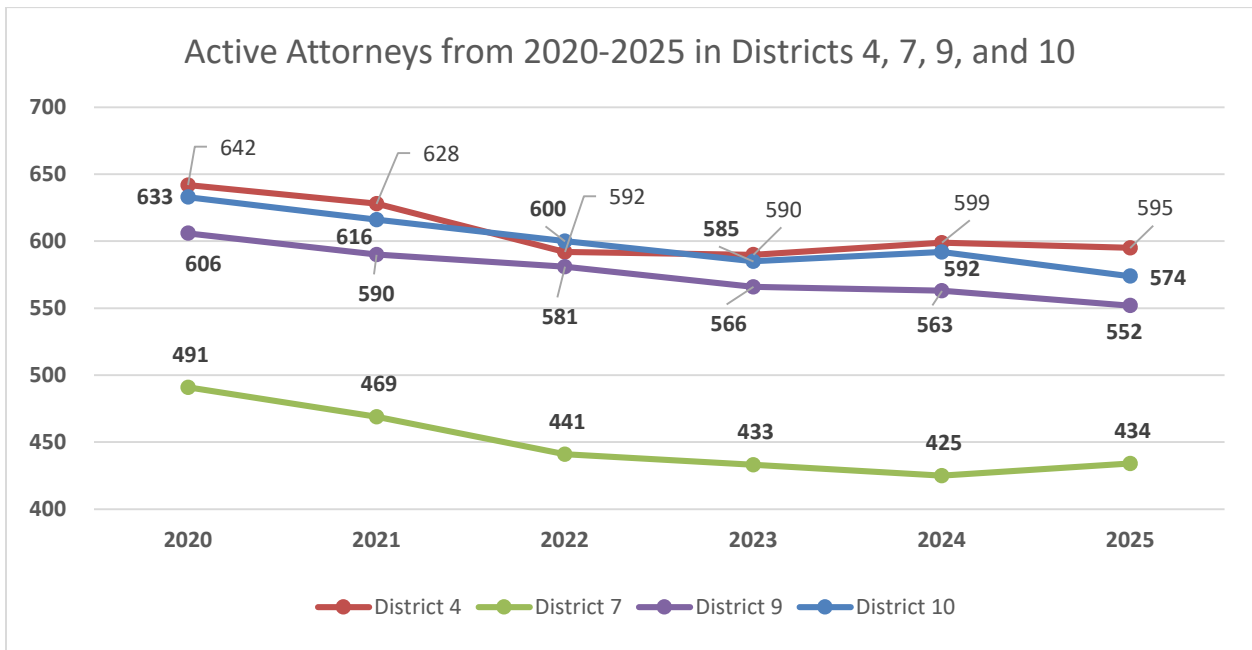
Source: Wisconsin Supreme Court.

See <https://www.wicourts.gov/courts/offices/map.htm> for more detail.

Appendix C: Active Attorney Levels by Judicial Administrative District, 2020-2025



Source: State Bar of Wisconsin. Includes Active, Active New, and Senior Active categories.



Source: State Bar of Wisconsin. Includes Active, Active New, and Senior Active categories.

Challenges and Solutions to Access to Justice Issues in Wisconsin

Additional Resources

- <https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/millions-of-americans-continue-to-lack-meaningful-access-to-justice-what-can-be-done-about-it>



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Inside the Efforts to Bring More Lawyers to Rural Wisconsin

Many lawyers and legal entities in Wisconsin and elsewhere seek to find workable remedies that lead to long-term solutions to increase the number of lawyers in rural areas, including the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the State Bar of Wisconsin, the UW and Marquette University Law Schools, and individual lawyers and law firms. Here is a look at some of these efforts.

By Jay D. Jerde & Shannon Green

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Three weeks after Jacob Gardner opened his solo practice in Monroe, his schedule was nearly full. Once the word was out, calls flooded in from Green, Iowa, Lafayette, and Grant counties.

Gardner hung out his shingle on Nov. 3, 2025, just one-and-a-half years into practice. “It’s been a little overwhelming in the best possible way,” Gardner said. “The courts are throwing appointments at me. I’m staying busy and I think I’m doing good work. It’s made me realize I made the right decision to go solo” in Monroe.

Gardner is one young attorney – but he is among many actively working on solutions for a reality they’ve witnessed: the loss of access to justice because of the lawyer shortage in Wisconsin’s rural areas. The issues include recruitment and retention, too many conflicts, and of course, too few lawyers.

Many in Wisconsin and elsewhere seek to find workable remedies that lead to long-term solutions for these issues, including the Wisconsin Supreme Court, the State Bar of Wisconsin, the law schools, and individual lawyers and law firms.

What the Wisconsin Supreme Court Is Doing

The serious shortage of attorneys working in rural areas of Wisconsin is well documented and has been discussed by many people and entities for years – one of the latest being the Wisconsin Supreme Court’s Attorney Recruitment and Retention Committee.

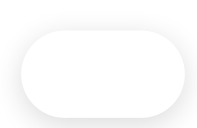
Then-Chief Justice Annette Ziegler established the committee in 2024. Participants include members of the supreme court, circuit court judges, including those also serving as judicial district chief judges, the Access to Justice Commission, deans of law schools in Wisconsin, the State Public Defenders (SPD) Office, the Wisconsin District Attorney Association, the Wisconsin Board of Bar Examiners, a district court administrator, and State Bar representatives and liaisons.^[1]

In November 2025, the committee released its [report and recommendations](#) on those issues throughout Wisconsin. First among its recommended strategies is improving attorney availability “particularly in high-need areas.”^[2]

The committee concluded that attorney rural recruitment programs in other states and programs designed to attract physicians and teachers to rural Wisconsin offer models that could reduce the lawyer shortage. Increasing hourly rates for private attorneys accepting SPD case appointments may improve willingness to cover rural areas – especially to cover travel expenses. Expanded use of remote technology for more hearings promises to increase representation, if hardware, bandwidth, and technical training are available.^[3]

Other recommended strategies noted in the final report involve increasing the supply of attorneys in Wisconsin, creating avenues for non-attorney professionals to provide legal services, and “utilizing existing legal resources as efficiently as possible.”

The committee delegated each recommendation to specific committee representatives for further investigation, and it plans to meet in a year to see what those committee members have discovered in studying the recommendations.^[4]





Three weeks after Jacob Gardner opened his solo practice in Monroe, his schedule was nearly full. He opened his office just a year and a half into practice.

What the State Bar of Wisconsin Is Doing

In the past, the State Bar hosted a rural bus tour, taking prospective attorneys to several counties to introduce them to the local bar association members. The tours ran from 2016 to 2018 and resulted in establishing connections among participants.

More recently, the State Bar has initiated two programs to address the issue: the [Rural Clerkship Program](#) and the [Rural Practice Development Program](#).

The State Bar **Rural Clerkship Program** connects Wisconsin and Minnesota law students with rural employers offering a limited-term, full-time, paid summer employment opportunity. Employment typically lasts eight weeks, starting after the end of the spring semester. The program is now in its third year. You can find out more at WisBar.org/RuralClerkship.

The goal of the State Bar **Rural Practice Development Program** is to recruit three attorneys each year over four years to establish their practices in rural Wisconsin. The program provides cash grants and other benefits to lawyers making a two-year commitment to rural practice.

Each recipient who commits to live and practice law in rural Wisconsin for at least two years will receive a \$5,000 award at the start and another \$5,000 upon completion of a minimum two-year commitment. Eligible recipients include attorneys who open a practice or begin full-time work at a firm or a governmental or nonprofit entity and must live within a geographic area defined by the program in counties with less than one attorney per 1,000 residents.

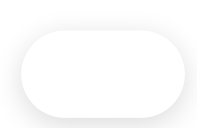
Watch for updates and program deadlines this spring at

WisBar.org/RuralPracticeDevelopment.

This program is possible thanks to a \$250,000 gift to the [Wisconsin Law Foundation](#) from Wisconsin attorney Kathryn Bullon – the Law Foundation’s largest-ever donation.

For Bullon, the reason for her donation was seeing that the “lack of access to lawyers jeopardizes the ability of people to obtain legal guidance in everything from buying or selling a home, creating a valid will and estate plan, running a business, to crafting powers of attorney to provide for their own future care and that of loved ones whose competence may be or may become impaired.”

“This access gap creates unacceptable stress, uncertainty, and potentially legal jeopardy for the people who live in areas without adequate representation. The practical, everyday impacts of not having access to local and trusted legal counsel pretty much sum up the problems facing people who live in underserved communities,” Bullon said. “And of course, that is what drives the State Bar’s efforts to try to find workable remedies that lead to long-term solutions.”





Kathryn Bullon's generous donation will boost access to justice in rural areas of Wisconsin.

One of the program's initial three participants is Wassim Malas, who left Milwaukee to be an associate with Bender, Larson, Chidley, Koppes, Hetfield & Associates in Watertown. He joined the firm on Sept. 29, 2025.

Choosing law to help people, Malas decided to pursue a rural practice after learning of Wisconsin's "legal deserts." The Rural Practice Development Program was his pathway.

He knew his move was the right one for him when he overheard, at his first Jefferson County Bar Association meeting, someone say "Attorney X is retiring? That's the last thing we need." "That moment underscored just how urgent it is for new attorneys to step into the roles retiring ones leave behind," Malas said.

He enjoys his practice in estate planning. "Making sure families are provided for is one of the most rewarding parts of my job. I come from a family of seven, but out here that's modest by comparison. It warms my heart to work with these large families," Malas said.

"While life can be just as hectic for lawyers out here, I find I am more at peace living among Wisconsin's greenery," he said.

What Individual Lawyers and Law Firms Are Doing

Individual lawyers and law firms are also actively seeking solutions to the lawyer-shortage crisis.

Designing a firm for rural practice.

Gardner's new practice in Monroe is designed to take on court appointments and small-business and family-law cases with low overhead and high flexibility. "I want to help small businesses, families, and children. My practice requires a willingness to drive (to court, to meetings with schools, to meetings with minors), but the work is rewarding, and every mile is worth it," Gardner said.



Wassim Malas, a participant in the State Bar's Rural Practice Development Program.

His real passion is working as a guardian ad litem (GAL). "The most noble client to have is a child, to be working in their best interest. I love the work and connecting with kids pulled into this complex system."

Gardner grew up in Beaver Dam. As a 3L seeking his first job, he applied at Duxstad McDaniel Law Group S.C., in Monroe. "Quite a few attorneys had lots of positive things to say about Daniel Bestul and Robert Duxstad – in terms of mentoring," Gardner said.

The Monroe location was ideal: "It strikes the balance between my desire for quiet and nature, and being near my Madison-based family members," he said.

Firm culture fostering retention. Daniel Bestul is a shareholder with Duxstad McDaniel Law Group S.C. (where Gardner got his start). Their aim is to bring in new lawyers and give them a solid foundation for a career in rural practice.



Bestul knows the difficulty of recruiting attorneys to rural areas – and to counter that difficulty, firm leaders at Duxstad start early. They recruit new attorneys via the law schools' on-campus hiring events in September each year, "so we are on the radar screen of 3Ls looking for jobs," Bestul said.

They ask for a three-year commitment from their new attorneys. "We see that as the length of time it really takes to fully understand what it means to be a lawyer in a rural area," Bestul said. "Hopefully they stay, but even if they don't, we've provided them with a good foundation for the next stage of their career."

What brings them in? A promise of robust mentoring. "Our experienced attorneys work closely with new attorneys," he said. "Our goal is to get new lawyers on their feet as practitioners as well as introduce them to running a law firm. A big part of the plan is to get them clients and into court early on."

There's recruiting, and there's retention, which also is a challenge. During those first years, it's about "getting young attorneys to understand the great benefits of being in a rural area – and it is a different lifestyle than Milwaukee or Madison."

One solution is becoming involved in the local area – to encourage them to know they belong there. "Our firm's mission statement says we have responsibilities as civic leaders. We encourage our new attorneys to get involved in the community and make connections here – that this is an important part of rural practice," Bestul said. That means finding a niche in the local area, such as serving on local boards and doing other volunteer work. "You need to make connections with people you see every day."

For Duxstad associate Sam Tooley, the firm's solid support has been critical. "The level of support from this firm has kept me here. In a rural community, the mentorship is important, but just as critical is having skilled, dedicated support staff – something my practice areas absolutely rely on. I have put down roots quickly with a new home. Altogether, the firm's overall approach to bringing in and supporting new attorneys has made a long-term commitment feel both practical and worthwhile."

David Ewert is another Duxstad firm associate; for him, the opportunity for mentorship was a key factor in his decision to come to Monroe. "I didn't pick the firm for its rural setting, but because it offered access to experienced, knowledgeable attorneys who take mentorship seriously, prioritizing professional development just as much as the finished work. I stay because I've been able to take on important work early on, but always with enough support that I'm never thrown into the deep end before I'm ready. When I have a difficult case or situation, I have people to turn to."



Lawyers with Duxstad McDaniel Law Group SC in Monroe include (from left): Sam Tooley, associate; Lance McNaughton, managing shareholder; David Ewert, associate; Dan Bestul, shareholder; Henry Morris, associate; and Amber Fuerbringer, associate.

Keeping small-town firms open. Nathan Russell is managing attorney and owner of Russell Law Offices s.c., based in Shullsburg, in Lafayette County. The firm's business model is unique in the rural practice environment.

Russell's plan is to grow by adding both associates and experienced attorneys – and through a mixture of opening new firms and purchasing and merging with existing solo and small firms in danger of closing, nearly all in rural areas of the state.

About five years ago, the firm had two offices and two attorneys. Today, it has 11 locations around southern Wisconsin, including Brodhead, Cuba City, Darlington, and Platteville, and in Illinois. It employs 14 attorneys, from senior managers to new associates. "We are still in the embryonic stages of our firm, since we are so new to this business model," Russell said.

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The model is specifically designed to deal with the growing shortage of rural lawyers. “We are reaching a crisis level with being able to provide quality legal services to rural communities. I know a lot of attorneys across the state, and while all seem overwhelmed, those in rural areas can barely come up for air. There is so much work that needs to be done. It is such a struggle just to understand where to start,” said Russell.

“Clients have to wait unhealthy long times to get services, if at all, or travel a significant distance to get the services that they should be able to get locally.”

Purchasing existing firms keeps them open where they may otherwise close due to a lack of attorneys. “I hatched this concept while in law school,” and implemented it about five years ago – prompted by the death at age 77 of a local attorney who had retired just the year before. “That made me reevaluate what I was doing,” Russell said. He started the new strategy just before the COVID-19 pandemic. But the resulting increased use of videoconferencing and other online services dramatically altered how law was practiced. “It allows our business model to flourish,” he said.

Key to success, of course, is recruiting new associates. “Having a clerkship program is our best chance to sell ourselves to top prospects and expose them to our firm and our communities. We also like to identify prospects originally from smaller communities and those with service-industry backgrounds, and candidates who have an entrepreneurial spirit.”

Finding the right fit with recruits and a law firm culture that mixes small- and large-firm elements are the keys to retaining new associates in rural areas, Russell said. “Each attorney operates their own mini-solo practice while not needing to handle collections, HR, and other administrative issues – while still having certain standards and the ability to get mentorship from others.”





Members of Nathan Russell's team include, from left, front row: Jace Wade, associate; Nathan Russell, president; Laine Carver, senior associate; back row: associates Nathaniel Yackel, Sam Goaley, and Maciej Czerlonko.

What Wisconsin Law Schools Are Doing

Wisconsin's two law schools see opportunities outside their host cities and encourage connections.

Erin M. Binns, assistant dean of Career Planning at **Marquette University Law School**, grew up in the rural community of Manitowoc.

"I appreciate the value of living in those communities," Binns said.

Marquette's Career Planning Center engages students in "meaningful conversations about the true values that students can gain in, for some, taking that risk and going to a community where they don't know anybody and have no connections," Binns said.

In February 2026, an event called Beyond Milwaukee will bring representatives from counties throughout the state to describe "what it means to live and practice there." A career fair will offer one-on-one discussions.



These visitors represent private practice, public service, and government – all available outside Dane County and Milwaukee.

The **University of Wisconsin Law School** sponsors similar events. Annual programs that bring students to Jefferson County and to the Fox River Valley are reaching out into other areas, said Emily D. Kite, associate dean for Career and Professional Development.



Emily D. Kite, associate dean for Career and Professional Development, UW Law School.

“Even though Jefferson County is not far from Madison, I think it’s ... outside of the realm where

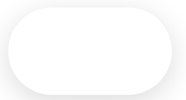
students are thinking about practicing until we let them know about the opportunities that are available there,” Kite said.

Last fall, the UW Law School hosted representatives of the Marathon County Bar Association on campus after “they approached us about wanting to get in front of students, and we were really excited to work with them,” Kite said.

The conversation revealed to the lunchtime audience opportunities in “wider Wisconsin,” Kite said, and more importantly for students, that they will find young professional colleagues in these communities.

A virtual program, currently in development, promises to expand contacts across the state, Kite said.

These meetings help students see professional opportunities and advantages of living in the community.



Marquette encourages community representatives to “highlight parts of their community” and the firm’s culture, Binns said.

Sometimes, it’s teaching about unexpected geography. “We’re only this many miles from Lambeau Field or from the Twin Cities,” Binns gave as examples.

At both schools, one-on-one conversations bring out the lawyer-to-be.

The student can identify “what they value as a law student or what they anticipate valuing in their early years of practice,” Binns said, and “rural practice potentially fitting into those values and goals in ways that the student hadn’t thought of.”

Kite reinforces the “holistic approach” her office offers students in “individualized advising” that provides information and resources to make those choices possible.

“We want to present them with a buffet of opportunities,” Kite said.

The UW Law School includes on-campus interviews, Kite said, with firms from Black River Falls, Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Janesville, and Wausau.

Similarly, Binns regularly has “phone calls with lawyers in rural communities looking to see how we can support them in their recruitment efforts.”

Many smaller firms don’t advertise, Kite said, because they don’t have recruitment resources. The UW Law School’s Office of Career and Professional Development encourages students to reach out to lawyers.

In the countryside, big-law issues await. A Marquette lawyer practicing in Ashland, Binns said, spoke to students last year about his “thriving practice with some really complex federal and state work.”

That includes local manufacturing corporations, “high-net-worth individuals,” and “complex succession and business planning, and contracting” for large farms throughout the state, Binns said.

“We know there’s a huge need in the areas of public defense and prosecution. I think that’s what a lot of people think of when they’re thinking about the shortage of attorneys,” Kite said.

“But we certainly need people to be doing business law, trusts and estates, personal injury. Anything we practice anywhere else needs to be practiced in areas of rural Wisconsin.”

Examples of Rural Practice Programs in Illinois, North Dakota, and South Dakota

	Illinois	North Dakota	South Dakota
Sponsor	Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA)	State of North Dakota	South Dakota Unified Judicial System
Year Started	2020-21	2021	2013
Length of Participant Commitment	1 year	5 years	5 years
Stipend	\$5,000 at start \$5,000 at end	\$9,000 per year (\$45,000 total)	\$12,513.60 per year (\$62,568 total)
Number in Program (per year)	5-10	8 maximum	32 maximum
Number in Program (cumulative)	37	3 participating (2022)	36 participated 19 graduated 14 still in community
Funding	ISBA; ISBA Mutual Insurance Co.; Donors	50% State of North Dakota 35% Municipality 15% State Bar	50% Unified Judicial System 35% Municipality 15% State Bar

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System, *Rural Attorney Recruitment Program*, <https://ujs.sd.gov/for-attorneys/rural-attorney-recruitment-program/>.

What's Being Done in Other Midwestern States

Midwestern states encourage rural practice in different ways, usually through providing opportunities and financial incentives to lawyers willing to serve rural communities. State bar associations often play a role (see table).

Governments have also stepped up. **North Dakota's** and **South Dakota's** similar Rural Attorney Recruitment programs, supported in part by state and local governments, allow rural counties and villages to apply to the state supreme court as locations seeking new rural lawyers. Lawyers receive annual stipends conditioned on staying five years.^[5]

Iowa maintains two rural practice programs – the Rural Practice Program sponsored by the Iowa State Bar Association and Drake Law School's Rural Access to Justice Initiative (RAJI), a program supported by donations from Drake Law School alumni.

The Iowa State Bar's Rural Practice Program, which began in 2012, hosts a "Meet and Greet" event, tantamount to "speed dating" between law students and employers. The process can create job offers for 2L summer clerks or 3L job applicants.^[6]

RAJI, which began in 2018, offers stipends to reduce financial barriers to rural clerkships and supports "a pathway to solo or small firm practice in rural Iowa towns" through mentorship, professional advice, assistance in obtaining initial client cases, a "start-up stipend in return for dedicated pro bono hours," and "donated or low-cost office space, reduced overhead, and access to case management software."^[7]

Countering the Misconceptions of Rural Practice

"There are many opportunities for attorneys in rural Wisconsin to build a rewarding practice both professionally and financially," Russell said.

"I understand that a lot of people like the allure of larger cities. I personally understand the desire of being in an area that may have more options of things to do, but if you don't have the time to actually enjoy them, is it worth it?"

With a rural or small-town practice, he says, "you can be in our communities on the weekdays, and then you have time to go to the larger cities on the weekend with actual time

to enjoy your time there.”

Gardner’s advice to new lawyers and those considering a rural practice: “Know that there is (a) a need for that service in a rural community, and (b) there is good work-life balance available in those rural communities while still earning a good living,” Gardner said.

“There’s plenty of work to be done, and its good work,” said Bestul.

These are the solutions in play in Wisconsin and beyond. What ideas do you have?

Endnotes

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3 *Id.* at 11-13, 16.

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