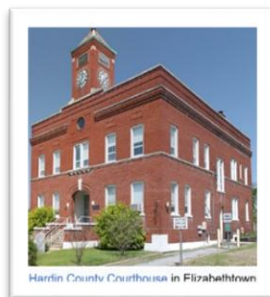


From Legal Desert to Oasis: Mapping the Legal Landscape in Illinois

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As you drive through rural Illinois, there is one unmistakable landmark that signals you have reached the county seat: the courthouse. Rising proudly in the center of town, these majestic, often ornate buildings, steeped in history,¹ are more than just places where justice is served, they are the civic soul of the community, anchoring its identity. But what happens when the lawyers in these towns start to disappear? Where do the residents find legal assistance?

Across rural America, the legal profession is vanishing. The U.S. has over 1.3 million lawyers but the vast majority are concentrated in urban centers. As the Baby Boomer generation² of lawyers retires in large numbers, many rural counties are left with fewer - and sometimes - no lawyers to take their place. This leaves vast rural areas with minimal legal support, often referred to as “legal deserts.” Residents needing help with legal matters as varied as real estate transfers, wills, custody disputes, or criminal defense matters often face long drives or forgo legal assistance altogether. Online tools, including websites that sell form legal documents or provide access to generative Artificial Intelligence, may offer limited types of assistance, but they cannot offer the training and experience of licensed professionals or replace the human presence of a lawyer rooted in the community, familiar with its rhythms, and trusted by its residents.



Consider Hardin County, Illinois, as an example, a rural area nestled in the scenic southeastern corner of the state, approximately five hours south of Chicago. With a population of just 3,649, it stands as Illinois’ least populous county and second smallest by area. Elizabethtown serves as its county seat.

Legal services located within the county are limited—only one lawyer reported a business address there as of 2025. When that lawyer is unavailable or eventually retires, residents may be forced to travel outside the county for legal help, possibly delaying urgent matters and making justice harder to reach for many.



To better identify and understand where legal deserts exist, the Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission (ARDC) is introducing updated questions for the 2026 registration. These new questions are designed to capture more accurate data about the legal profession in Illinois and illuminate hidden gaps in access to justice across the state. The ARDC’s effort is part of a broader push by the Illinois Supreme Court and justice system stakeholders to strengthen the legal infrastructure in underserved communities.

¹ Pictures of all Illinois courthouses can be found on the Illinois Supreme Court website - [Find Your Court - Interactive Map](#) or under “Courts Directory.”

² The Baby Boomer generation refers to people born during the post–World War II baby boom, typically between 1946 and 1964.

What is a "Legal Desert"

The term "legal desert" is similar to the concept of a "food desert"—regions where access to essential resources is scarce. In the case of legal deserts, the resource that is scarce is access to legal representation. These are geographic areas where residents face significant challenges in obtaining legal services, often due to a combination of factors that make access difficult.

One of the defining characteristics of a legal desert is the small number of lawyers in a geographic area. According to the American Bar Association, regions with fewer than one lawyer per 1,000 residents fall into this category. This scarcity is often compounded by geographic isolation. Many legal deserts are in rural or remote communities where infrastructure is limited, professional networks are sparse, and economic opportunities for lawyers are minimal. As a result, new lawyers may be hesitant to establish practices in these areas, leaving residents without nearby legal support.

Economic hardship also plays a critical role. Legal deserts frequently overlap with communities facing financial instability, where residents may struggle to afford legal representation even when it is available. This lack of demand, driven not by a lack of need but by a lack of financial means, further discourages lawyers from serving these regions, perpetuating a cycle of inaccessibility.

This is a challenge for every state including Illinois. Approximately 88% of all Illinois lawyers who register as Active practice in the six counties that make up metropolitan Chicago (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will). 72% are in Cook County alone. That leaves only 12% of Illinois lawyers spread across the remaining 96 counties. And when you subtract lawyers not in private practice, the numbers become even more revealing.

There are 61 counties in Illinois that have 20 or fewer lawyers that identify as being in private practice; 46 counties have 10 or fewer. Four counties (Edwards, Hardin, Pope, and Pulaski) have only one lawyer each in private practice. Moultrie County has none. Of the 469 private practice lawyers in these 61 counties, more than half (253) are aged 60 or older. As these lawyers retire, many rural counties face the real risk of losing their last remaining lawyers.



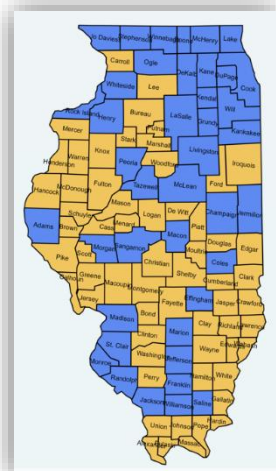
Why It Matters

In many legal deserts, the nearest lawyer may be hours away, requiring long drives that are prohibitive for low-income individuals who lack reliable transportation. This travel barrier not only delays access to justice but often deters people from seeking help altogether.

Even digital solutions, which might seem like a lifeline, are often out of reach. Remote areas frequently suffer from poor internet connectivity or lack broadband infrastructure altogether, making it difficult to access online legal resources, participate in virtual consultations, or even file documents electronically. Without access to legal support, residents may find themselves navigating complex and high-stakes situations, such as eviction, bankruptcy, or criminal charges, entirely on their own.

ARDC's Role: Using Data to Map the Legal Deserts

These responses, along with other data, are compiled and presented in aggregate in the ARDC's annual report, which offers a snapshot of the legal profession in Illinois. In the context of discussing the underserved areas of Illinois, the question arises whether this data fully captures all the places where lawyers are actively practicing.

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In addition, lawyers who affirm that they have provided *pro bono* legal services within the past twelve months will be prompted to select the county where those services were rendered from a dropdown menu. The menu includes 61 counties in Illinois, organized alphabetically by judicial district. If services were provided in a county not listed, lawyers may choose the “Other” option.

³ Lawyers are asked in the registration process if they are currently practicing law. A lawyer is considered to be practicing law if they represent even one client during the year, including on a *pro bono* basis, or hold themselves out to be authorized or qualified to give legal advice or perform legal services.

These new registration questions⁴ reflect a broader commitment to equity and transparency in the legal profession. By collecting more granular location data, Illinois can better support initiatives that bring legal resources to communities that need them most. Registration notices for 2026 began going out via email on October 1.

Efforts to Expand Access to Justice Across Illinois

The Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) was created by the Court⁵ in June 2012 to "promote, facilitate and enhance equal access to justice with an emphasis on access to the Illinois civil courts and administrative agencies for all people, particularly the poor and vulnerable."

To make the courts more navigable for self-represented and low-income litigants, the Court has championed several initiatives⁶ including the creation of approved standardized forms for use across all Illinois courts, enhancing language access, and funding courthouse-based programs⁷ that assist court users in every circuit court. One such program that is funded by grants received from the ATJ is Illinois Legal Aid Online (ILAO).

ILAO is a nonprofit organization that offers free legal information, guided forms, and referrals to help individuals resolve legal issues on their own or with limited assistance. ILAO can be found in many underserved counties like Hardin County and is accessible statewide through its online platform.⁸

In April 2025, the Illinois Supreme Court adopted the *Pro Bono* Pilot Project, which is a two-year pilot program that allows Illinois lawyers to earn up to one hour of Minimum Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) credit for every two hours of *pro bono* participation they complete with Illinois Free Legal Answers. It marks the first initiative in Illinois to link MCLE credit directly to *pro bono* work. From July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2027, the two-year pilot program will be managed by the Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI).⁹

Most recently, the Court approved in concept the Community Justice Worker Program during its September 2025 Term of Court. This initiative allows certified non-lawyers to provide limited legal assistance in high-need areas under the supervision of licensed lawyers, aiming to expand access to justice across underserved communities in Illinois.¹⁰

⁴ Starting with the 2026 registration process, all lawyers will be required to answer certain practice demographic questions including practice details, current position, ethics/compliance officer, and succession planning. Previously, responses to these questions were automatically carried over from year to year unless manually updated. The new approach aims to capture more accurate and up-to-date data about the practice demographics of the Illinois bar.

⁵ See Ill.S.Ct. Rule 10-100.

⁶ To learn more about the work of the IL Supreme Court Commission on Access to Justice (ATJ Commission) go to <https://atjil.org/>.

⁷ Grant awards made by the ATJ Commission are funded through publication royalties, *pro hac vice* fees, and attorney registration fees.

⁸ <https://www.illinoislegalaid.org/>

⁹ See Ill.S.Ct. Rule 795(d)(14). Illinois Free Legal Answers: <https://pili.org/pro-bono/mcle-for-pro-bono-pilot/>

¹⁰ <https://www.illinoiscourts.gov/News/1619/Illinois-Supreme-Court-approves-vision-for-new-Community-Justice-Worker-Program/news-detail/>

In addition to these initiatives, the Illinois State Bar Association launched the Rural Practice Fellowship Program¹¹ in 2020 to tackle the shortage of lawyers in underserved areas. The program connects rural and small-town law firms looking to hire law clerks and associates with law students and lawyers interested in practicing law in rural communities of Illinois. It provides job placement assistance in rural communities, a stipend to augment their salary, connections to the rural community, MCLE credit to lawyers participating in the program, and continuing support throughout the program. Donations can also be made to support the program.

Conclusion: Mapping the Path Forward

Legal deserts are more than just a shortage of lawyers; they are also likely to exist in areas where the shortage of lawyers is compounded by the scarcity of other resources. Factors like geographic isolation, sparse populations, and socioeconomic barriers all contribute to the uneven distribution of legal services.

The new registration questions introduced by the ARDC in the 2026 registration will capture *every* county where a lawyer actively practices, rather than just their principal business location. This expanded data will provide a clearer, more accurate map of underserved regions. It will also help guide ongoing efforts by the Illinois Supreme Court and others and help us all to ensure that the justice system serves everyone.

Legal deserts are not inevitable. With clearer data from ARDC's new registration process, we can pinpoint the gaps—and chart a path to close them. This is a pivotal moment: data is the starting point, but progress depends on the choices we make together. Lawyers, judges, policymakers, and communities each have a role to play. Together, through coordinated action, Illinois can transform its legal deserts into oases of access and justice and ensure that courthouses across rural Illinois remain vibrant centers of service, fairness, and community.

¹¹ Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA) Rural Practice Fellowship Program: <https://www.isba.org/ruralpractice>.