

## Washington State Rural Practice Project Prompts<sup>1</sup> for Ideation Brainstorming

In November 2019, the Washington State Bar Association (WSBA) formed a project team to explore ways in which WSBA could support rural practice in Washington state. The following prompts are intended to help participants understand the benefits, barriers, and challenges the project team has identified and assist in brainstorming possible solutions the WSBA may consider to support legal practice in rural areas.

### Demystifying Rural Practice:

1. How can the WSBA identify, create awareness, and provide information about the benefits and opportunities of working in rural areas?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. Opportunities/benefits are different depending on community, e.g., Orcas Island has high cost of living vs. Ferry County has lower cost of living;
    - ii. Some communities require more of a general practitioner as opposed to specialized;
    - iii. Many communities in need of family law attorneys and government attorneys;
    - iv. Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.
2. How can the WSBA change the perception that practicing in rural communities is unappealing and financially unsustainable?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. Even if perception is changed, rural living is largely a personality trait and often practitioners in these areas already want to live the rural lifestyle and/or have some prior connection to a rural community.
    - ii. The cost of living in some rural areas is the same, if not higher, than King County e.g. Orcas Island.

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<sup>1</sup> The questions posed and considerations are primarily derived from the research conducted by WSBA's Rural Practice Project Team, including a survey and outreach calls to rural practitioners in Washington state, a survey of WSBA's new members, and outreach to the three Washington state law schools. Secondary sources that were utilized for additional informational purposes include outreach to entities outside of Washington state that have rural placement programs and various articles and other literature about rural practice generally.

### **Entering Rural Practice:**

3. How can the WSBA help prepare professionals to enter rural practice?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. High student loan debt is a burden for newer practitioners;
    - ii. Role of law schools.
4. How can the WSBA match legal professionals with opportunities in rural areas?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. Government and other legal practice job openings remain vacant;
    - ii. Practitioners winding down their practice struggle to find someone to take over;
    - iii. Practitioners/firms looking to hire new attorneys may not be aware of current economic trends, competitive salaries, needs of new attorneys, etc.;
    - iv. Creating/finding the “homegrown” attorney.
5. How can the WSBA create/foster mentorship relationships?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. Difficult for law students to do internships in areas without additional resources/housing/financial support;
    - ii. Need for help in making connections within the community and culture/skepticism of outsiders;
    - iii. Law clerk program is a lengthy time-commitment.

### **Staying In Rural Practice:**

6. How can the WSBA identify and provide resources to support rural practitioners?
  - a. *Considerations:*
    - i. Many practitioners don’t have access to law libraries;
    - ii. High student loan debt is a burden for newer practitioners;

iii. Current rural practitioners feel like they cannot retire because of fear that no one would serve their community if they left.

iv. Spouses/partners of practitioners often cannot find work in their field.

7. How can the WSBA ensure attorneys who practice in rural community stay and succeed?

a. *Considerations:*

1. Placement programs that currently exist do not have enough data to support retention after placement term;
2. Many practitioners do not stay if they are not a “homegrown” attorney or not wanting to live a rural lifestyle;
3. Financial burdens of practitioners, e.g., student loan debt; minimal social life opportunities.