

## OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND FOR LAWYERS IN SMALL COMMUNITIES



Web exclusive commentary



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A new initiative of the Canadian Bar Association British Columbia Branch is to bring about awareness of the many opportunities that exist for lawyers in small communities. The Rural Education and Access to Lawyers Initiative is a co-ordinated set of programs funded by the Law Foundation of British Columbia that will highlight the many advantages of practice in non-urban regions. Its goal is recruiting new lawyers to these regions prior to the anticipated large-scale retirement of senior practitioners.

The abundance of opportunities for lawyers in small communities is in part a combination of two factors: the aging of the profession as a whole and the preference of new lawyers to practise in urban regions.

The aging trend of the profession mirrors that of the Canadian population with the proportionally large baby boom generation nearing retirement age. In British Columbia this translates into a current average age of lawyers of 47. Almost half of lawyers in the province are currently over 50.

In small communities this demographic trend is even more evident with an average age of over 50 with some communities showing averages in the 60s.

In addition to the aging trend in the profession, there is also a clear preference among new lawyers to practise in urban regions. This was illustrated by a recent survey of articled students in British Columbia that revealed that 80 per cent of students were articling in the Metro Vancouver region and 74 per cent were planning to stay there to practise.

The combined effect of these trends has resulted in a significant shortage of lawyers practising in small communities and rural areas throughout British Columbia and the rest of the country.

This shortage has not gone unnoticed however, and both the Law Society of British Columbia and the Law Society of Upper Canada have voiced their concerns over this issue.

In 2005, the LSUC released the final report of the sole practitioner and small firm task force that noted a number of significant issues including concerns relating to the ongoing renewal of the practitioners in less populated parts of the province of Ontario.

More recently, in 2007, the LSBC's small firm task force released its report which raised similar concerns and stated:

"Outside of the urban areas, where there are fewer medium size and larger firms, the absence of younger lawyers is more prevalent. These numbers raise concerns about whether the sole and small firm bar is renewing itself, particularly in less populated parts of the province, and whether pressures and challenges make it more difficult to attract lawyers to sole and small firm practice."

While the concerns over the renewal of the bar are certainly justified given the aging of senior practitioners and the preference among new lawyers to practise in urban regions, what these trends also reveal is that there has never been a better time for lawyers to establish a practice in small communities.

Lawyers interested in practising in small communities can expect a number of advantages over urban practice including greater work-life balance, excellent one-on-one mentorship opportunities from senior lawyers, and most importantly, the ability to establish a successful practice in a short time frame.

In the past, the opportunities available in small communities were not well publicized however, the Rural Education and Access to Lawyers Initiative is set to change this.

The REAL Initiative was established in March 2009 and has already made a significant impact in raising the profile of the many practice opportunities that exist in small communities and rural areas in B.C.

The initiative includes a number of programs designed to attract new lawyers to practise in non-urban regions and support lawyers in these regions in the recruitment, hiring, and retention process.

The main programs of the initiative include:

- Funding for second-year summer student placements in rural and small communities throughout B.C.;
- Financial and promotional support to assist with the marketing of regions to law students and new lawyers;
- Professional support from the CBA-BC regional legal careers officer for students who are interested in practising in rural and small communities; and
- Professional support from the CBA-BC regional legal careers officer to assist law firms and practitioners with the recruitment, hiring, and retention of students and new lawyers in rural and small communities.

The short-term goal of the initiative is to ensure that law students and new lawyers are aware of the many opportunities and benefits of practice in small communities and that local practitioners are supported in recruiting and hiring for these opportunities.

In the long-term, it will increase the numbers of new lawyers practising in small communities before a large number of lawyers retire in order to ensure access to legal services for people living in these communities.

Its most immediate impact has been made through the summer student placement program, which has been well-received by both practitioners and law students alike.

Through this program, 11 summer students were placed in regions ranging from Campbell River on Vancouver Island to Cranbrook in the Kootenays and Fort St. John in the north of the province.

Next steps for the initiative include further engagement of key stakeholder groups including universities and local bar associations and the preparation of a comprehensive report that will provide analysis and recommendations for future action.

It is clear that if the current demographic trends in the profession continue, small communities and rural areas may face a shortage of lawyers in the future and may have to deal with the associated challenge of a lack of access to legal services.

This is not a foregone conclusion however, as viewed in a different context these trends create an abundance of opportunities for a new generation of lawyers to obtain first-rate mentorship from senior practitioners and establish successful practices in these communities.

The Rural Education and Access to Lawyers Initiative is one example of an innovative approach to ensuring that new lawyers are aware of the opportunities that exist in non-urban regions and with continued engagement of both students and practitioners alike will help to ensure both the success of lawyers and the continued access to legal services for the communities they serve.

Further information regarding the initiative can be found at [www.realbc.org](http://www.realbc.org).

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