

Law Council encourages lawyers to make a 'tree change'

Country Australia is used to 'doing it tough'. The last decade has demonstrated the effects of natural disasters including floods, bushfires and drought that place immeasurable strain on bush communities throughout the nation.

But there's also a rising social disaster that is threatening the ongoing existence of many communities in country Australia. Like a drought slowly evaporating life from the land, the population of rural, regional and remote (RRR) communities in Australia is dwindling.

In the period 2008-2009, population losses mainly occurred in inland rural Australia. Just over three-quarters of Australia's population live in its 17 major cities (those with a population of at least 100,000 people). The population of Australia is projected to be 35 million by mid-century, but the vast majority of this growth will be concentrated in major cities. Australia's cities are set to get even bigger, whereas many RRR communities will continue to dwindle.

As RRR communities' populations decrease in size, a drain on professional services will inevitably follow. Doctors, nurses, dentists, teachers and lawyers are all in great demand in many RRR areas. But instead of going up, their ranks are steadily thinning out.

The Law Council of Australia is particularly concerned about the ongoing problems in recruiting and retaining legal practitioners in RRR

areas.

As President of the Law Council, the peak national representative body of the Australian legal profession, Alex Ward has said that recruiting and retaining lawyers in RRR areas was an issue in need of serious attention.

There's a real concern that if this trend of lawyers leaving, and not coming to, RRR areas continues, then local residents will not be able to access adequate legal services.

This loss of legal services will impact negatively on rural and regional commercial infrastructure, and also on the community life of country towns.

The Law Council conducted a survey of practitioners in RRR areas and released its results in 2009. The survey painted an alarming picture of the future of legal services in many RRR areas, but has also been vital in helping the Law Council identify where the problems are and what measures need to be taken to rectify them.

The survey showed that 43% of the principals surveyed did not have enough staff to properly service their client base, and that RRR areas are facing an alarming exodus of lawyers.

In fact, 42% said they would not be practising law in five years time.

This represents an alarming potential skills gap for regional Australia; a gap that will not be easy to fill."

Many law firms and community legal centres are unable to find lawyers to fill vacancies when they arise and are being impeded by the drain of corporate knowledge caused by a constant turnover of staff.

Studies have shown there are only three lawyers per 10,000 residents aged 18 years and older in remote Australia when compared to about 11 lawyers per 10,000 in capital cities of Australia, and evidence suggests that this situation will deteriorate further in the next five to ten years as a large number of experienced principals retire.

But what also concerns Mr Ward is the void in volunteer and pro bono work that will need to be filled.

A lot of residents in RRR areas are some of the most disadvantaged in Australia who rely on pro bono legal services.

- 64 per cent of practitioners surveyed by the Law Council indicated that their firm undertakes pro bono work, and that 71 per cent undertake other unpaid voluntary work within their area;
- Some firms deal with over 30 legal aid cases a year. They're essentially 'keeping the system going';
- What are residents in these areas going to do if they can't access these legal services? What's going to happen to their local communities?

In May 2010, in response to the RRR issue, the Attorney-General, Robert McLelland, announced

that the Australian Government would provide funding for projects to attract lawyers to work in legal assistance programs in RRR areas of Australia.

This announcement included the allocation of one-off funding of up to \$250,000 — for the Law Council in collaboration with the National Association of Community Legal Centres to develop a national website, DVD and marketing campaign.

The Commonwealth Government funding is a very important part of our RRR strategy.

The Law Council is already working with state and territory law societies to promote and support country lawyers and their communities; we have established a national Recruitment and Retention Working Group; and we continue to drum up awareness in the legal profession about RRR.

But the funding is very important as it gives us much needed financial clout to put into action a range of RRR related initiatives.

The Law Council developed a Project Plan in July 2010 outlining how the Federal Government's \$250,000 funding allocation will be directed and managed.

A national website will form the centrepiece of the push to recruit and retain staff in RRR areas and will include:

- a portal for lawyers interested in

practising in regional and rural Australia;

- profiles of the private profession and legal assistance providers servicing regional areas and the nature of their work;
- job vacancies for lawyers in regional and rural areas within Australia;
- profiles of regions;

There will also be a promotional and informational DVD and online video containing interviews with practitioners regarding their experiences and benefits of practising in RRR.

The website and DVD are part of an integrated marketing and promotional campaign to raise awareness of employment opportunities in RRR locations across Australia.

The Law Council is also working on a range of other policy driven initiatives to improve lawyer recruitment and retention rates in RRR areas.

In particular, a lot of focus has been aimed at encouraging young lawyers to look at RRR areas as a realistic option.

The Law Council of Australia continues to be a strong advocate for country Australia and its fight to attract and keep its legal professionals.

We are working with government and the profession to make sure there are strategies in place to ensure people residing in RRR areas have comparable

standards of legal services and access.

We have done the groundwork in identifying where the issues lie and will look towards the future in implementing strategies to make sure the law and justice systems of rural, regional and remote areas not only survive, but prosper. ●



- case studies and experiences around practising in these areas;
- information about other programs available to practitioners interested in working in country Australia; and
- the practical legal training options available.