

Surveying the landscape: identifying the rural, regional and remote (RRR) problem

The Law Council of Australia's Rural, Regional and Remote Areas Lawyers Survey was conducted in 2009 in response to the growing problems in recruiting and retaining legal practitioners in country Australia.

The survey was aimed at collating concrete evidence for a problem that had, up until 2009, primarily existed anecdotally.

The online survey was sent by the law societies in each state and the Northern Territory to their members working in RRR areas and received strong support from the country legal community with a total of 1,185 practitioners participating.

The results of the survey confirmed what many country lawyers had already been discussing: RRR law firms and community legal centres are unable to find suitable lawyers to fill vacancies and are feeling the strain of constant staff turnover.

And perhaps more worryingly, the results also showed the problem was set to get worse in the next five to ten years as a large number of experienced principals retire.

The most significant results from the survey included:

- 43% of principals surveyed indicated that their practice does not have enough lawyers to serve their client base.
- Sole practitioners made up 46% of all responses.
 - Of this group, 30% have been practising in country areas for more than 21 years and almost 36% of these practitioners do not intend to be practising law in the next five years.
 - Overall, 42% of the legal practitioners who responded to the survey do not intend to practise law in five years time.
- The principals who responded to the survey cited succession planning as their biggest concern (71%), followed by concerns about attracting additional lawyers to the firm (58%) and attracting lawyers to replace departures (51%).
- Of the younger lawyers surveyed (20-29 years), 30%

indicated that they only intended to practise in their area for less than two years.

- 25% of young lawyers indicated that they would leave the country for better pay. Further, 28% of this younger age group would leave their current firms to join a city based firm and 15% would leave to start a new career.
- Country practitioners undertake a significant amount of legal aid work, with 51% of respondents indicating that their firm accepted legally aided matters.
 - Of those firms, 50% dealt with more than 30 cases per year.
- More than 64% of respondents indicated that their firm undertakes pro bono work, and 71% of respondents undertake other unpaid voluntary work within their area.

The Law Council gratefully acknowledges the extensive assistance provided by the Law Institute of Victoria in undertaking the survey. ●



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