

All Things Judicial Focuses on Legal Deserts and Access to Justice in Rural Communities



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Almost half of North Carolina counties are considered "legal deserts," which is defined as having fewer than one attorney per 1,000 residents.

RALEIGH — The latest episode of [All Things Judicial](#) focuses on legal deserts and the lack of access to legal representation in some of North Carolina's rural communities. Our guest is the [Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism's](#) (CJCP) Co-Executive Director Jimbo Perry. In addition, we hear from attorneys Sarah Beth Withers ([Beaufort](#)) and Reatter Neal ([Franklin](#)) who share about living and working as attorneys in rural communities. In the first segment, Perry defines the legal desert issue and describes CJCP's role in recruiting attorneys and increasing access to justice in rural areas of the state.



"I've been trying to get the truth out about what is called by many a legal desert, and in my mind the truth is that these places are really a legal oasis," said Perry on the podcast. "They're a place that can really capture the imagination and heart of why people went to law school in the first place."

A "legal desert" is defined as a county which has fewer than one attorney for every 1,000 residents. In North Carolina, 48 counties fit this definition despite having experienced a population growth of almost one million residents over the last decade (2010-2020). One of the reasons for this effect, is that the population growth has occurred in North Carolina's 30 urban counties, with the fastest growth having occurred in the Raleigh, Charlotte, and Wilmington areas. That trend may result in 70% of North Carolina counties going without new attorneys able to provide legal services to residents in small, rural communities. But the attorneys who do locate in designated legal deserts often find high satisfaction in their careers and significant lifestyle improvements over their time spent in urban communities.

"You have control over your career. You have control over your family life. It gives you the freedom to set your own calendar and decide what kind of law you want to practice," said Sarah Beth Winters on the podcast. "I don't have to put-in 80+ hours a week to create the lifestyle that I want because living in a rural community is cheaper. It's been able to give me a really strong sense of community and family that's very rewarding."

To find out more about legal deserts in North Carolina, please contact the Chief Justice's Commission on Professionalism at [NCCourts.gov](#).

MORE INFORMATION

All Things Judicial is a podcast about the important role of the North Carolina Judicial Branch in state government. The podcast follows a bi-monthly release schedule with each new episode available for download every other Wednesday and can be found on all podcast apps and on [NCCourts.gov](#).

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About North Carolina Judicial Branch

The [North Carolina Judicial Branch](#) is an equal and distinctively separate branch and core function of government. More than 7,000 Judicial Branch employees statewide administer justice in courthouses in North Carolina's 100 counties. The [Judicial Branch budget for FY 2021-22](#) was \$672.4M, 86.2% of which is used to pay salaries and the remaining 13.8% is used for operations. The Judicial Branch receives only 2.59% of the overall State budget.

About North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts

The North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (NCAOC) is the administrative agency for the [North Carolina Judicial Branch](#), providing administrative services to help the North Carolina court system operate more efficiently and effectively, taking into account each courthouse's diverse needs, caseloads, and available resources.

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