



Western Australia

Rural, Regional and Remote Area Lawyers Survey

Introduction

In March 2009, the Law Council of Australia coordinated a nationwide survey of legal practitioners in rural, regional and remote (RRR) areas of Australia. The study was conducted in order to explore widespread concerns within the profession that suggested there were significant problems in recruiting and retaining lawyers in country Australia. Through the study, the Law Council sought to obtain data from country lawyers about the current and future needs of their practices with an emphasis on exploring future employment intentions, retirement, succession planning, legal aid and pro bono work. The online survey was sent by the law societies in each state or territory to their members working in RRR areas.

The Law Council released the results of the national study in July 2009. The full report is available from the Law Council website.

The survey gathered significant data on country lawyers from across Australia. Set out here is a snapshot of the survey findings relevant to Western Australia.

Main findings

- ◇ **Response rate:** 26% of Western Australian lawyers responded to the survey (in total 29 practitioners completed the survey). This compares with a total national response rate of 24% (with 1185 practitioners taking part in the survey overall). The survey was distributed by the Law Society of Western Australia to all of its members who work outside of Perth.
- ◇ **Practice type:** In Western Australia, 75% of respondents were private practitioners and 21% were lawyers who practice in community legal centres.
- ◇ **Employment status:** 43% of Western Australian respondents were employees and 54% were principals. Nationally, these figures were 49% and 45% respectively.
- ◇ **Length of practice in a RRR area:** In Western Australia, respondents had most commonly worked in a RRR area for between three to five years or 11 to 20 years (29% respectively). The smallest

“...country
Australia is
facing a crisis
in the area
of access to
justice...”



proportion of Western Australian respondents had been in practice in a RRR area for more than 21 years (4%). Nationally, the largest group of respondents (22%) had been in practice in a RRR area for three to five years.

◇ **Intention to continue practice in a RRR area:** Most commonly, Western Australian respondents indicated in the survey that they intended to continue to practice in a RRR area for three to five years (37%). In total, 52% of Western Australian respondents indicated that they would leave practice in a RRR area in the next five years. Nationally, this figure was 42%.

◇ **Reasons for working in a RRR area:** The most commonly cited reasons for working in a RRR area by Western Australian respondents were 'work/life balance' and 'nature of the legal work'. Nationally, the most cited reason was 'work/life balance'.

◇ **Reasons for leaving a RRR area:** Most Western Australian respondents (and also respondents nationally) indicated that 'family reasons' would be their main reason for moving away from a RRR area altogether. The least commonly cited reason for leaving the country in Western Australia (and nationally) was 'isolation'.

◇ **Reasons for leaving current firm/organisation:** Most commonly, Western Australian respondents indicated that they would leave their current firm to retire (22%). Other key reasons for Western Australian respondents leaving their current firms were – to move to another practice in their area, to move to a legal practice in the city and to start a new career (19% respectively). Nationally, most practitioners indicated that they would leave their current firm to retire (20%).

◇ **Shortage of lawyers:** Principals were asked in the survey to consider whether their practice had enough lawyers to service their client base and community generally. Of the Western Australian principals surveyed, 20% indicated that they did not have enough lawyers to service their current client base and 67% indicated that they did not have enough lawyers to meet the legal needs of their community. Nationally, these figures were 43% and 45% respectively.

◇ **Matters of concern for principals:** Western Australian principals indicated that the key area of concern for their practices is succession planning (80%). Attracting additional lawyers and attracting lawyers to replace departures (both 53% respectively) were also key matters of concern for Western Australian principals. Nationally, succession planning was the most common area of concern for principals (71%).

◇ **Legal aid work:** In Western Australia, 46% of respondents indicated that their firm undertook legal aid work. Of those respondents, 33% indicated that that their firm undertook more than 30 cases in the last 12 months. Nationally, these figures were 51% and 50% respectively.

◇ **Pro bono work:** 61% of Western Australia respondents indicated that their firm accepted matters on a pro bono basis. Nationally, 74% of respondents indicated that they undertook pro bono work.

◇ **Volunteer work:** In Western Australia, 79% of respondents undertook additional volunteer work within their communities. Nationally, this figure was 71%.



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