



2018 Maine Law Rural Law Fellows, from left, Brittanie Bradley '19, Amanda Bridges '20, Ryan Rutledge '19, and Kathryn King '20.

Tackling the Rural Law Crisis

Innovative program puts students in underserved communities

“Adequate legal representation should not be found only in urban areas. It must exist in every corner of our state.”

Dean Danielle Conway

By Liz Woodbury

Mainers who live in rural communities face a crisis in their access to justice. This lack of access to lawyers, and by definition justice, threatens to grow significantly worse due to changing demographics and an aging legal workforce.

Maine Law has emerged as a leader in efforts to develop the next generation of rural lawyers. Through its innovative Rural Lawyer Project and additional outreach efforts, the Law School is comprehensively tackling a serious problem that confronts Maine and other states.

When it comes to the number of practicing lawyers per capita, Maine lags behind not just the rest of New England, but the country as a whole. While the national average is 40 lawyers per 10,000 residents, in Maine it's only 30 lawyers per 10,000 residents. To make matters worse, these numbers are sharply skewed to the southern part of the state, with more than half of all lawyers living or practicing in Cumberland County. This means that rural Maine, in which 60 percent of the state's population resided as of

the most recent census, is vastly underserved by legal services.

This situation looks to worsen because of the average age of Maine's lawyers. As of 2017, approximately 1,000 of the 3,700 practicing lawyers in Maine were 60 or older. In rural parts of the state, 65 percent of lawyers are older than 50. As these lawyers begin to retire in the coming years, and with few younger practitioners replacing them, Maine's rural citizens face an increasing lack of access to justice.

"We need to act as allies and ensure that the rule of law works for everyone," says Maine Law Dean Danielle Conway. "Adequate legal representation should not be found only in urban areas. It must exist in every corner of our state."

Fellowship program founded

In 2017, with funding from the Maine Justice Foundation, Maine Law launched the Rural Lawyer Project, a three-year program that aims to fight this problem by awarding paid summer fellowships to students who work in law offices in Maine's most rural counties.

These Rural Law Fellowships, which pair students with rural lawyers who serve as mentors, are designed to provide students with direct exposure to rural practice and inspire them to con-

sider pursuing careers in these communities.

Born as a collaboration between the Law School, the Maine Justice Foundation, the Maine Board of Overseers of the Bar, and the Maine State Bar Association, the Rural Lawyer Project has completed a second successful year, in which applications from potential rural mentors and interested students far exceeded available funding – reflecting the viability of the Rural Lawyer Project.

The four 2018 Fellows worked in law offices in Aroostook, Piscataquis, and Washington counties under the guidance of practicing lawyers. To qualify, potential mentors must practice in communities that have fewer than 10,000 residents and are outside of Cumberland and York counties.

During the 10-week fellowship period, the students learned about the wide variety of legal matters that lawyers serving in rural communities manage. Fellows gained hands-on experience in legal research and drafting, dispute resolution, general practice case management, real estate transactions, criminal law, and trial practice.

Reflecting on the breadth of her work, Kathryn King, a 2L student, says, "There's no time to specialize. My mentors have to learn to do everything, because there is so much need for help in every area of the law."

DeJesus '13 reaches out to rural Idaho communities

Since Diana DeJesus '13 began her position as associate director of admissions at the University of Idaho College of Law in 2016, she has spent most weekends and evenings moonlighting as a community builder, with a particular interest in rural issues.

DeJesus's self-described "passion for community building" inspired her to start the popular Boise Bucket List Instagram account, through which she provides insight into living in Idaho and organizes events that bring people together in real life. Additionally, DeJesus's Collaboration Over Competition event series offers "a safe space for women to create intentional and deep relationships."

DeJesus honed her community building skills at Maine Law, where she planned events while serving as the president of the Student Bar Association (SBA), so that "classmates and colleagues could focus on creating deeper relationships beyond the competitive climate of law school."

Her classmates so valued these contributions that the SBA voted to rename their community service graduation award in her honor. It is now called the Diana DeJesus Distinguished Service Award. She was also a co-founder of the Multicultural Association of Maine Law (now Multicultural Law Society).

DeJesus's work with the University of Idaho involves connection as well, including outreach efforts in less populated counties. "Many of the rural high schools lack valuable resources, such as career counselors," she says. "My role as associate director is to share the value of education (not necessarily just law school) to students who otherwise might not consider college."



There are many things about Idaho that remind DeJesus of Maine, not least of which is the state's rural identity.

"There is this vastly large rural community sprawled across both states, with small, concentrated population centers," she says. "I'm thrilled to have brought Collaboration Over Competition to rural areas, where women live in small towns with even smaller populations. I'm able to host events where rural women have an opportunity to feel less isolated and make connections with like-minded women."

Success story

And the program is working. Ryan Rutledge, a 3L student who spent this past summer working at Mills, Shay, Lexier & Talbot in Skowhegan, has accepted the offer of a post-graduation position with the firm.

“The value of this experience comes in several forms,” Rutledge says. “Most importantly, it addresses the graying of the Maine Bar and the resulting decrease in access to justice in the rural areas most affected by it. People outside of densely populated areas need good legal representation, too. The Rural Lawyer Project is one way we can make sure that happens.”

Rutledge’s commitment to rural access to legal representation runs deep.

As vice president of Maine Law’s Finch Society, he helped draft a bill (LD 1680) intended to further expand opportunities for rural practitioners. Modeled after a similar program for rural dentists, the bill, sponsored by State Rep. Donna Bailey ’86 (D-Saco), would have provided income tax credits to five lawyers beginning full-time practices in underserved parts of Maine.

While the bill was ultimately unable to secure funding, it had bipartisan support and was approved in committee. When Rutledge reflects on the experience, he emphasizes the importance of taking action in state government.

“One of the goals of the Finch Society has always been to actually do something,” he says. “We didn’t want to be just another student group that has meetings to create rules for when we have other meetings. We put a lot of work into LD 1680. We made calls, wrote emails, and testified in front of the Joint Standing Committee on Taxation at the State House in support of the bill.”

Access to justice

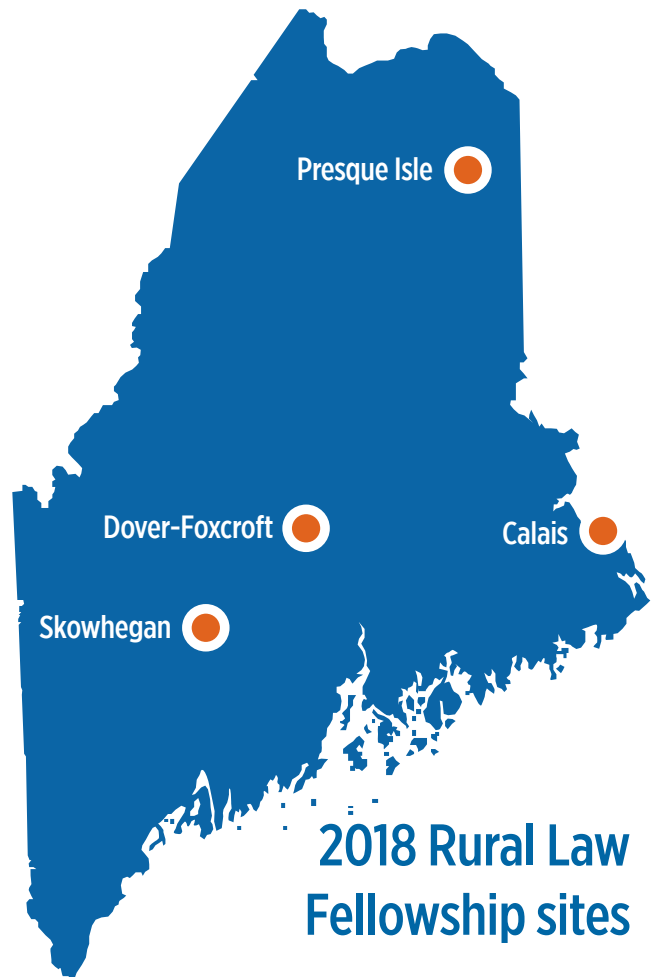
The ultimate goal is for the Rural Lawyer Project to be endowed permanently and expanded, providing access to justice for and engagement with the entire state.

The program’s popularity is clearly reflected in both the interest by potential mentors at rural law firms and in applications by Maine Law students. In 2017, Maine Law received four times as many mentor applications as there were funded fellowships. The number of student applications also greatly exceeded the number of fellowship spots.

According to its executive director, Diana Scully, the Maine Justice Foundation has been extremely impressed with the project’s inaugural two years. “The Foundation looks forward to continuing its collaboration with the Law School to help identify resources to help sustain the Rural Lawyer Project beyond the third

Rural Law Symposium

Save the Date: The University of Maine School of Law will co-host a rural-focused *Maine Law Review* symposium with Colby College on April 12 and 13, 2019. The “Ensuring Equal Access to Justice in Maine’s Rural Communities Symposium” will present panel discussions and presentations delivered by attorneys, judges, and legal scholars, addressing access to justice challenges facing rural communities in Maine and elsewhere.



and final year of the pilot,” she says.

Dean Conway, a passionate supporter of Maine Law’s commitment to rural communities, has spoken about the issues of rurality and the rule of law at law schools including Creighton University School of Law and at the annual conference of the Association of American Law Schools. She recently co-authored an article for the *Harvard Law & Policy Review* titled “Legal Deserts: a Multi-State Perspective on Rural Access to Justice” and has co-founded the Alliance for Lawyers and Rural America, a clearinghouse for promoting the rule of law in rural America.

“Rural communities are vital to defining Maine’s identity,” she said at the launch of the program. “With the Rural Lawyer Project, my goal is to make sure Maine Law has a role – among several other partner organizations – in providing professional legal services to Maine’s rural, regional, and remote communities for the promotion of economic and workforce development as well as the provision of necessary social and human service support.”

As you will see in the next four pages, the program has successfully exposed Maine Law students to careers in rural areas, and the experience has made a lasting mark.

As King, who worked in Calais at Fletcher, Mahar & Clark, explains, “The Rural Law Fellowship links communities with new attorneys and shows them how fulfilling and interesting life in rural Maine is. In the long run, that can only benefit the entire state. The purpose of the fellowship is to close the justice gap in Maine. My experience in Calais suggests that it is doing just that.” **ML**

Brittanie Bradley '19

Hayes Law Office



Dover-Foxcroft

Becoming a Rural Law Fellow fit perfectly with one of the main reasons I came to law school. In 2014, I moved to Hermon in Penobscot County, and I knew I'd return after graduation. I wanted to make a difference in my community and felt law would be a great way to make an impact.

This past summer, I learned that to practice rurally you need to be a jack-of-all-trades. Due to the small number of lawyers and minimal resources available, you have to really understand multiple facets of the law and know enough to help a wide variety of clients.

I was taken aback at how few attorneys practice

in Piscataquis County and the fact that the youngest was in his mid-30s. Although Dover-Foxcroft is rural, it's only about 40 minutes from Bangor. It surprises me that available jobs and the proximity of a small city wouldn't be more of a draw for new lawyers.

To me, the value of the Rural Law Fellowship is that it gets students out there, supporting those in need and connecting with these communities, during law school and after graduation.

This program is a pathway for students to get the experience they need and to build connections while also helping people along the way.

“The value of the Rural Law Fellowship is that it gets students out there, supporting those in need and connecting with these communities . . .”

Kathryn King '20

Fletcher, Mahar & Clark



Calais



I've lived and worked in a rural part of the state for many years. I want very much to practice in rural Maine as well, either doing criminal defense, LGBTQ advocacy or advocacy for migrant workers. The Rural Law Fellowship gave me an ideal opportunity to be practice-ready.

I saw firsthand how stark the justice gap truly is in rural Maine, and I learned how skilled, dedicated, and professional the attorneys and judges practicing in Washington County are. My mentors couldn't have been better. They brought me with them to hearings, jury selections, and post-conviction reviews. They also gave me opportunities to do legal research and writing that made a difference for real people.

It sounds obvious, but every day I was reminded that people seeking legal help aren't just cases or files. From the tiny, elderly lady with dementia who doesn't want a guardian because she's "just fine, thank you very much" to the middle-aged man cited for "illegal winkling" (illegal taking of periwinkles, who knew?), these are real people.

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In the long run, that can only benefit the State of Maine. The purpose of the fellowship is to close the justice gap in Maine. My experience in Calais suggests that it is doing just that.

"The Rural Law Fellowship links communities with new attorneys and shows them how fulfilling and interesting life in rural Maine is."

Ryan Rutledge '19

Mills, Shay, Lexier & Talbot



During our first semester of law school we were lucky enough to meet the Hon. Andrew M. Mead, who currently sits as an associate justice on the Maine Supreme Judicial Court.

He talked about access to justice in rural parts of Maine and how the graying of the bar was contributing to this issue.

I came to law school because I wanted to help others and recognized this as an opportunity presenting itself to me: I decided then that addressing the problem of access to justice would become my top priority. When I became aware of the Rural Law Fellowship, I immediately knew I wanted to participate.

There are certain things you can't learn from sitting in a classroom. You can spend hours reading about how the law has been applied in certain factual scenarios, but nothing prepares you for your first day working at a law firm aside from actually doing it. And until you spend a lot of time around many different lawyers, you don't really realize just how many correct ways there are to practice law.

Having the opportunity to observe attorneys of all ages from all over the state has allowed me to develop a sense of what kind of advocate I want to be when I start practicing. I am thrilled that I will be returning to Skowhegan after I graduate to join the firm of Mills, Shay, Lexier & Talbot.

"I came to law school because I wanted to help others and recognized (the Rural Lawyer Project) as an opportunity presenting itself to me . . ."

Amanda Bridges '20

Bemis & Rossignol



Presque Isle



I chose to participate in the Rural Law Project after working for the Maine Judicial Branch. I witnessed firsthand the difficulty that rural parts of the state have in enticing young attorneys to come to the area.

I had spent some time in Houlton, Presque Isle, and Caribou prior to attending Maine Law. The Rural Law Fellowship allowed me the opportunity to actually live in Aroostook County and get a feel for what life in a rural community is like.

The thing that surprised me most about working in Presque Isle was how busy rural firms are. These

are not sleepy, small-town attorneys – most of them have vital, thriving businesses and careers.

As a first-year law student, everything about the experience was challenging initially. The fast pace of the office along with the familiarity of a small community were both completely new to me.

In the end, the time I spent in the County brought me back to Maine Law with more confidence in what I was learning. The experience also confirmed that going to law school was the right path for me to take.

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