

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Learning From Eastern Oregon Attorneys

An Opportunity to Connect

By David Rosen

During the last week of June, CEO Helen Hirschbiel and I traveled across northeastern Oregon, meeting with bar members across the region. The trip was an opportunity to visit with attorneys, judges and courthouses – talk shop, dive into the issues and ideas shaping the practice of law in this beautiful part of our state, and of course, share in good company and food. I learned much about the advantages and challenges in both the practice of law and in access to justice across these areas. I'd like to share a few takeaways, common themes and recognize the great work being done in eastern Oregon.

The lawyers we met generally love practicing law in this region and have created deep and meaningful connections to the communities they serve. They are also independent, creative problem-solvers when it comes to tailoring law practice and public service to the unique needs of communities that are often far from major hubs or population centers. Meeting them was inspiring.

Still, the challenge of attracting lawyers to the region perpetuates the “legal desert” issue that has been a growing concern to the bar and courts in recent years. The lack of lawyers and struggle to fill vacancies came up in every county. Likewise, there was no scarcity of effort by lawyers in these communities to fill these voids.

Recruitment Tools and Efforts

From John Day to Ontario to Hood River, there are early adopters of the Supervised Practice Portfolio Exam (SPPE) to attract attorneys to eastern Oregon. This included attorneys in private practice, public defender offices and district attorneys. As Oregon has led the charge in this pathway to the bar, we have a unique opportunity to attract applicants from other states. This window of opportunity will not last forever, as other states are following Oregon's lead and developing similar programs. I was

excited to see how well the SPPE was being utilized in its inaugural year.

The SPPE was also embraced in creative ways. A Hood River firm is in the process of recruiting a licensed lawyer from another state, who will use the SPPE for admission to the OSB. The out-of-state lawyer did not meet one of the requirements for admission via comity (active practice for two of the last four years). But the lawyer is a strong candidate, and this will allow them to begin practicing immediately under their approved supervisor until full admission to Oregon.

As we traveled through eastern Oregon, we heard repeated requests to allow lawyers and firms to get pre-qualified as Supervising Attorneys and Supervising Employers prior to identifying an applicant. This would allow lawyers with open positions to advertise as SPPE-pre-qualified. This was an excellent suggestion and I am happy to report that, in response, the bar has already implemented efforts to put this in motion.

Another creative approach to recruitment was looking even further east. One law firm in Ontario recently hired a law clerk from the University of Idaho College of Law and sees the Idaho law school as an untapped resource for recruiting new lawyers across the Snake River to Malheur County.

We also heard from some folks who were excited about the changes to the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP), which now invites rural practitioners to apply. This year, the bar provided loans to four lawyers, using their rural practice as criteria. We also discussed tailoring our website and conducting outreach to other states to highlight the SPPE and Oregon's rural regions as ripe with opportunities for launching a fulfilling law practice.

Finally, several members will be participating in the Oregon New Lawyer Division

(ONLD) Rural Practice Road Show later this month to share job opportunities (and a free lunch!) with students at all three Oregon law schools.

The challenges of recruitment and retention of lawyers in rural Oregon are very apparent. We – together with the ONLD – will continue to engage on these issues.

Addressing Court Access

Another common topic was the challenge of providing access to justice in areas that are both geographically remote and lacking in technology and infrastructure. It is not uncommon for lawyers in eastern Oregon to drive two hours for a 10-minute hearing. In small towns, conflicts can force parties to go well outside their own counties for legal assistance.

Remote hearings have become a viable answer to some of the geographic access issues. Practitioners in eastern Oregon are particularly familiar with remote proceedings and provided thoughtful suggestions to improve their use, including: uniform rules and technology, and minimum standards across jurisdictions; cameras that offer a clear view of the parties and judges, including facial expressions; and mechanisms for litigants to speak confidentially to their own counsel, as they do at counsel table.

Meanwhile, remote proceedings are less available to litigants or lawyers who lack high-speed internet, which is much more common in rural areas. Once again, our eastern Oregon colleagues are exploring creative solutions, including the use of kiosks in remote communities with internet hot spots, where courthouses do not exist.

Finally, we saw several courthouses in great need of repair. We repeatedly heard stories of how this impacts the function and efficiency of the system, and the importance of providing safe and accessible courthouses. In Oregon, the state and county split

the cost of building and maintaining the physical court structures, which can be challenging in rural counties with fewer economic resources.

A Highlight in Wasco County

As we concluded our trip, we had the opportunity to sit in on a graduation ceremony for three participants in the Wasco County Treatment Court Program. The program offers an alternative to standard case processing, to address the recurring cycle of addiction, co-occurring disorders, criminal behavior and court involvement. It is designed to promote self-sufficiency and return participants to the community as whole and productive citizens.

It was truly a joyous occasion hearing from the three graduates about their journey, the life-affirming decisions they are making and their bright futures ahead. Presiding Judge Karen Ostrye led the graduation with strength and compassion and is clearly invested in helping participants succeed. It was a particularly heartening way to end the trip.


I'd like to thank all of the lawyers and judges who welcomed us. There is simply no substitute for hearing directly from members in these counties to understand the legal needs in their communities, courts and law practices.

Despite some of the challenges of rural practice, many of the lawyers we met are thriving in their practices, and credit their rural practice with a deep satisfaction in the practice of law. I came away feeling like some of these towns may be the bar's best kept secret in terms of law practice balance and opportunity.

I look forward to the fall, and remain ever grateful for this role, and the opportunities for service and connection that it has afforded me this year. ■



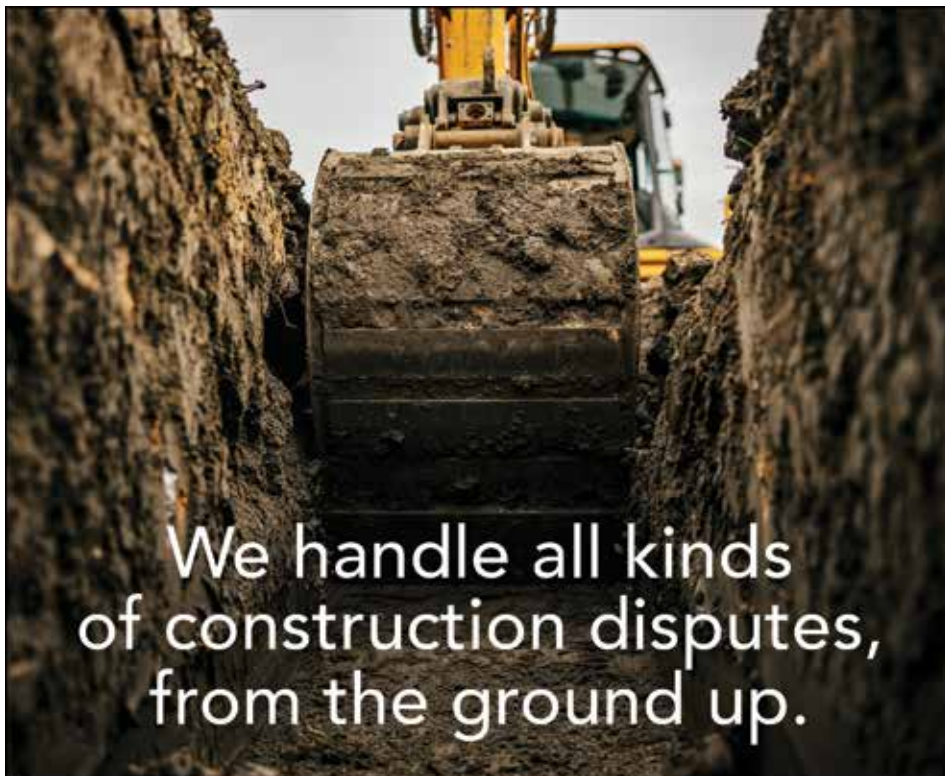
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