**The Importance of Legal Incubator and Mentorship Programs within Rural New York**

by Marissa Hochberg

*The Government Law Center’s explainers concisely map out the law that applies to important questions of public policy*.

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# Introduction

Many rural counties in the state of New York have remained underserved in the legal community leading to hardships that these attorneys and therefore potential clients are then faced with. Young attorneys are disincentivized from practicing in small rural communities due to educational debt and higher paying opportunities. The majority of attorneys in rural communities are middle aged and over, so when they retire, these communities will have less legal support to rely on unless younger attorneys fill their places. Throughout my research, I have become aware of various other state bar association and law school programs that may be successful if implemented within the state of New York, specifically mentorship and incubator programs aimed to help smaller firms and to replace retiring attorneys.

**RESOURCES**

SAMPLE: This explainer deals with legal incubator programs. For more information, check out the American Bar Association Website:

<https://www.americanbar.org/groups/delivery_legal_services/initiatives_awards/program_main/>

# What are Legal Incubator Programs?

Legal Incubator Programs serve as training for newly- admitted lawyers that can benefit from the skills and knowledge that allow them to start their own legal practices. Law schools have developed similar programs, some specifically targeted towards rural communities.[[1]](#footnote-1) Within the past decade, many law schools have taken the initiative across the United States to develop such programs aimed at helping students learn to establish themselves in small firms or their own practice. Currently, New York and California have the most established legal incubator programs in the nation. The Bowen Rural Legal Incubator Program at the University of Arkansas Little Rock William H. Bowen School of Law helps recent graduates develop innovative, and economically viable law practices that may increase access to legal justice in rural Arkansans.[[2]](#footnote-2) This program is targeted specifically to students who wish to practice in their home counties but did not feel as though there were enough resources to do so. Students learn professional etiquette and develop research capabilities necessary to practice law. The original purpose of legal incubator programs was to address a civil justice issue around New York City, particularly to assist recent graduates in being able to establish skills necessary to start a small legal practice to support underserved communities. Many legal incubator programs are funded through grants through state bar associations, such as the Los Angeles Incubator Consortium (LAIC). The LAIC is a partnership between Southwester Law School, UCLA School of Law, Loyola Law School, Los Angeles, legal aid organizations, and the Los Angeles County Law Library.[[3]](#footnote-3) The students enrolled in the program engage in various pro bono hours and training from legal professionals in the area. The students have access to various training in substantive areas of law in order to help them build their practices. Many aspiring attorneys are often fearful of solo practice, but the incubator program took that fear away says a recent graduate of UCLA Law School (Soma cited in Rich).

**RESOURCES**

This explainer provides examples of legal incubator programs, for more information on the Bowen Rural Legal Incubator Program check out their website:

<https://ualr.edu/law/clinical-programs/rural-practice-incubator-project/>

A recent UCLA grad that now operates a small practice in West Hollywood commented on the benefits of the incubator program, and how it is enlightening for both the attorneys and the clients.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**RESOURCES**

This memo provides examples of successful incubator programs, find out more information on the Los Angeles Incubator Consortium here:

<https://www.laincubatorconsortium.com/>

<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/innovative-incubator-program-boosts-recent-grads-helping-in-the-community>

While there are various implications of legal incubator programs and many serve different purposes in various communities, the relevance of legal incubator programs in rural communities is essential to increasing legal access in these areas.

# II. What are mentorship programs?

According to management mentors, mentoring is “most often defined as a professional relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists another (the mentoree) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less-experienced person’s professional and personal growth.” The role of a mentor is to teach the mentoree about a specific issue, coach the mentoree on a particular skill, facilitates the mentoree’s growth by sharing resources and networks, challenges the mentoree to move beyond his or her comfort zone, creates a safe learning environment for taking risks, and focuses on the mentoree’s total development.[[5]](#footnote-5) Mentorship programs may seem quite similar to incubator programs, but mentorship programs may cross the line from professional to personal and may be both formal and informal lasting beyond a specific amount of time.

The Mobile Alabama Bar Association has developed a specific “lawyer mentoring” program which was created in 2016 to offer no to low cost networking opportunities’ to newly admitted members to the local bar association.[[6]](#footnote-6) There are two aspects of this program: “Group Mentoring” and “The Fundamentals Continuing Legal Education”. The group mentoring program is offered a few times a year and features a panel discussion of experienced lawyers. A few of the topics that are discussed include: “Preparing and Implementing a Law Firm Business Plan” “Leaving a Firm” and “How to Talk with Clients about Attorneys’ Fees”. These topics address many concerns that new practicing attorneys face that put limitations on their line of work. Crossing these barriers may be very helpful for young attorneys to successfully practice law at an earlier stage in their life. The Fundamentals of Continuing Legal Education offers 8 full hours of credit in various areas of legal expertise. This program is sponsored by Thompson Reuters which allows the program to be offered at a low/no cost which is important, because many recent graduates are burdened with student loans and would not be able to take on the costs of an additional program, meaning they would lose out on the valuable resources that such programs have to offer.

**RESOURCES**

This memo provides information about mentorship programs, find out more here:

<https://www.management-mentors.com/resources/corporate-mentoring-programs-resources-faqs#Q1>

# III. Why rural New York?

The important question to address here is to determine why rural communities, particularly in New York State need to adopt these specific programs to overcome rural justice inequalities. Most of this information has been established by research conducted by the Albany Law School Government Law Center, and other valuable partners including the New York State Bar Association and SUNY Cobleskill’s Institute for Rural Vitality. Taier Perlman’s research conducted through the Albany Law School Government Law Center in collaboration with information from the Center for Human Services Research at the University at Albany establishes various contemporary challenges that are associated with rural legal practice. There are many setbacks for both the attorney, and the client in these specific communities. One of the main concerns is the greying bar in rural New York. According to Perlman, 74.3% of respondents of surveyed attorneys in rural areas noted that they were 45 years or older, and 54% of respondents have met or are soon to meet a retirement age. Although almost half (46.4%) noted that they hope to retire within the next ten years, but 54.5% of respondents noted that they do not have a feasible replacement for their practice. This issue alone provides sufficient background knowledge to establish the point that the aforementioned mentorship and legal incubator programs are crucial to support the legal community in rural New York. As noted with the legal incubator and mentor programs, lack of experience and knowledge is a major setback for young attorneys which may deter them from practicing in small communities. If New York State were to implement these programs, there may be more educated and experienced attorneys prepared to practice law in their hometowns. It is important to set up a solid foundation for these recent graduates so that they successfully educate young attorneys on various areas of expertise, to avoid turning away clients. 57.1% of survey respondents mentioned that they turned clients away because the subject matter was out of their expertise. The lawyers that currently serve rural communities are overworked and underpaid for their services, therefore these legal incubator and mentorship programs are essential to increase legal influence throughout rural New York.

**RESOURCES**

This memo provides information from a report written by Taier Perlman, check it out here:

<https://www.albanylaw.edu/centers/government-law-center/the-rural-law-initiative/Documents/rural-law-practice-in-new-york-state.pdf>

# Conclusion

In summary, there are various different legal incubator and mentorship programs established throughout the United States aimed at supporting young business professionals entering the workforce. The success rates of these various programs are elaborated on by many participants, and surely would be worth any initial expenses upfront. These programs would be particularly useful in rural communities due to the shortage of rural lawyers, and the lack of legal representation as a whole in rural New York. If implemented specifically geared toward rural New York communities, these programs will educate and prepare recent law graduates on the specific expertise that they plan on practicing in which will allow them to overcome the fear of operating a small practice. Both legal incubator and mentorship programs include various networking opportunities which will expose young attorneys to various members of their communities that may serve as useful resources for their professional and personal lives. Allowing experienced attorneys to essentially train newer attorneys may reduce the greying bar in these areas and allow for more replacement of legal support, meaning there will be more attorneys to take on clients that before may have not received legal services. The addition of a rural legal incubator and or mentorship program will be beneficial to both practicing attorneys, and clients receiving their services. This is a call to action to assist in increasing access to legal justice, among various other fields including health, social and political inequalities currently represented in rural upstate New York to ensure the quality of life for these residents for generations to come.

1. "Legal Incubators." American Bar Association. Accessed August 01, 2019. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/delivery\_legal\_services/initiatives\_awards/program\_main/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Rural Practice Incubator Project." William H Bowen School of Law. Accessed August 01, 2019. https://ualr.edu/law/clinical-programs/rural-practice-incubator-project/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Los Angeles Attorney Incubator Consortium." Accessed August 01, 2019. https://www.laincubatorconsortium.com/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rich, Joshua. "Incubator Program Boosts Recent Law School Graduates Helping in the Community." UCLA. November 06, 2017. Accessed August 01, 2019. http://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/innovative-incubator-program-boosts-recent-grads-helping-in-the-community. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Engagedly Inc. "Definition of Mentoring - Benefits of Mentoring." Management Mentors. Accessed August 01, 2019. https://www.management-mentors.com/resources/corporate-mentoring-programs-resources-faqs#Q1. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Vaughan, Gregory E., “The Mobile Bar Association’s Mentoring Program.” Accessed August 01, 2019. <https://holstonvaughan.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)