

Rural Attorney Recruitment Program



2026 Annual Report

"We face the very real possibility of whole sections of this state being without access to legal services. Large populated areas are becoming islands of justice in a rural sea of justice denied." —Chief Justice David Gilbertson

Purpose

In 2013, the South Dakota Legislature approved the Recruitment Assistance Pilot Program (SDCL 16-23) to address the current and projected shortage of lawyers practicing in small communities and rural areas of South Dakota. The program was made permanent in 2019 and was also expanded to include municipalities that have less than 3500 residents.

This program provides qualifying attorneys an incentive payment in return for five (5) continuous years of practice in an eligible rural county or municipality.

Eligibility

Attorneys must enter into a contract with the Unified Judicial System (UJS), the State Bar and the eligible county or municipality in order to participate. Qualifying attorneys within the program will receive an incentive payment, payable in five equal annual installments, each payment equal to 90% of one year's resident tuition and fees at the University of South Dakota School of Law, as determined on July 1, 2013. This amounts to \$12,513.60 per year, with a total benefit of \$62,568 for each attorney.

To be eligible to participate in the recruitment assistance program, counties/municipalities within the State of South Dakota must:

- Have a county population of 10,000 or less, or a municipal population of 3,500 or less;
- Agree to pay 35% of the total amount of the incentive payment, payable in five equal annual payments.
- Apply to the UJS by submitting a letter of intent from the County Commissioners and be accepted into the program by the UJS; and
- Is determined to be eligible by the UJS.

To be eligible for participation, an attorney must:

- Be a U.S. citizen, U.S. National or permanent resident of the U.S.;
- Have a Juris Doctorate degree from an ABA accredited institution and provide a transcript;
- Be licensed as an attorney in the State of South Dakota;
- Never have been disbarred, suspended or publicly censured from the practice of law in any jurisdiction;
- Be willing to reside in the county or municipality he/she serves unless the county or municipality otherwise agrees;
- Keep the UJS informed of changes to his/her physical and mailing addresses as well as any change to his/her telephone number;
- Carry malpractice insurance during his/her involvement in the program and provide proof thereof;

- Provide a Certificate of Good Standing from the SD Supreme Court;
- Agree to practice full time as an attorney within an eligible county for a minimum of five consecutive years. Full time is defined as a minimum of 35 hours per week, for a minimum of 49 weeks per year. Excess hours cannot be applied to any other work week. Participants are allowed to spend no more than 21 full time workdays per year, excluding federal and state holidays, away from their practice for vacation, continuing legal education, illness, or any other reason;
- Have never previously participated in this program, or any other state or federal scholarship, loan repayment, or tuition reimbursement program that obligates the person to provide attorney services within an underserved area; and
- Submit a complete application and be approved for participation in the program by the UJS. The UJS will consider not only the above requirements, but also the following:
 - Evaluation of the attorney seeking assistance under this program; and
 - Existing or previous ties of the applicant to the county or municipality.

History

Altogether, there have been 39 current and past participants under contract in the program. There are currently 10 active attorneys practicing in rural communities. 23 of the 39 participants have graduated out of the program and 18 of the 23 graduates have stayed in their communities to continue practicing. There were 6 terminated contracts mostly due to different job opportunities presented to the participant. Of those 6, one moved to Brookings, one moved to Pierre, one to Rapid City, one moved to Vermillion, one moved out of state, and one is not currently practicing law.

The following counties/municipalities have participated in the program:

Aurora	Gregory	McCook
Bennett	Haakon	McPherson
Bon Homme	Hand	Mellette
Brule	Harding	Miner
Custer	Hutchinson	Perkins
Dewey	Hyde	Sisseton/Roberts
Douglas	Jackson	Spink
Elk Point/Union	Jerauld	Sully
Fall River	Lyman	Tripp
Grant	Marshall	Wentworth/Lake

Most of the participants are graduates of the University of South Dakota School of Law.

Financial Data

Funding for this program has come from different sources since its inception. In 2013, the Legislature passed HB 1096 which established the program and appropriated \$475,000 from general funds to fund incentive payments for no more than 16 attorneys. In 2015, the Legislature passed SB 178, which expanded the program to 32 attorneys and appropriated \$500,000 in other fund expenditure authority to be paid from the court automation fund to cover incentive payments for 16 additional attorneys. In both cases, all unused funds reverted to the state per state law. As mentioned above, in 2019, the program concluded its pilot status and the Legislature appropriated \$150,000 in other fund expenditure authority in SB 191 (General Appropriations Act). Court automation funds continue to support the program and the funding level has not changed.

All expenditures from the Rural Attorney Recruitment Program have been for direct incentive payments to eligible attorneys within the program. No money has been spent for personnel or any other administrative expenses. Direct incentive payments by the State of South Dakota by fiscal year are shown below:

Year	State Contribution	County/Municipality Contribution	State Bar Contribution
FY15	\$6,256.80	\$4,379.76	\$1,877.04
FY16	\$31,284.00	\$21,898.80	\$9,385.20
FY17	\$50,054.40	\$35,038.08	\$15,016.32
FY18	\$66,947.76	\$43,797.60	\$18,770.40
FY19	\$108,242.64	\$78,835.68	\$33,786.72
FY20	\$112,622.40	\$78,835.68	\$33,786.72
FY21	\$87,595.20	\$61,316.64	\$26,278.56
FY22	\$93,852.00	\$65,696.40	\$28,155.60
FY23	\$68,824.80	\$48,177.36	\$20,647.44
FY24	\$68,824.80	\$48,177.36	\$20,647.44
FY25	\$62,568.00	\$43,797.60	\$18,770.40
FY26	\$68,824.80	\$48,177.36	\$20,647.44

Counties Eligible for Rural Attorney Recruitment Program Placement

Aurora County	Stanley County
Bennett County	Sully County: Shantay Werdel
Bon Homme County	Todd County
Brule County: Steven Meyer	Tripp County: Mason Juracek
Buffalo County	Turner County
Campbell County	Walworth County
Charles Mix County	Ziebach County
Clark County	
Corson County	
Custer County: Kaleb Peterson (town of Custer)	
Day County	
Deuel County	
Dewey County	
Douglas County	
Edmunds County	
Fall River County: Austin Schaefer	
Faulk County	
Grant County	
Gregory County	
Haakon County	
Hamlin County	
Hand County	
Hanson County	
Harding County	
Hutchinson County: Dylan Novak and Kiera Leddy	
Hyde County: Shantay Werdel	
Jackson County: Cassie Wendt	
Jerauld County	
Jones County	
Kingsbury County	
Lake County: Conner Hickman (town of Wentworth)	
Lyman County	
Marshall County	
McCook County	
McPherson County	
Mellette County	
Miner County	
Moody County	
Perkins County: Paden Sexton	
Potter County	
Sanborn County	
Spink County	

