



Northern Territory

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 the Northern Territory.

Main findings

- ◇ **Response rate:** 19% of Northern Territory lawyers responded to the survey (in total 91 practitioners completed the survey). This compares with a total national response rate of 24% (with 1185 practitioners taking part in the survey overall). For the purposes of the survey, the whole of the Northern Territory (including Darwin) was considered a RRR area. The survey was distributed to all members of the Law Society of the Northern Territory.
- ◇ **Practice type:** Compared with other jurisdictions, the Northern Territory had the most diverse make up of practitioners who responded to the survey – 33% of respondents were private practitioners, 28% were government lawyers, 24% of respondents worked in Legal Aid or Aboriginal Legal Aid and 4% worked in community legal centres.
- ◇ **Employment status:** The majority of Northern Territory survey respondents were employees (73%) compared

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



with 15% of respondents who were principals. The Northern Territory recorded the highest response rate from employees. Nationally, these figures were 49% and 45% respectively.

◇ **Length of practice in a RRR Area:**

In the Northern Territory, most commonly survey respondents had only been in practice in a RRR area for one to two years (25%). Nationally, the largest proportion of respondents indicated that they had been practising in a RRR area for three to five years (22%). The smallest proportion of Northern Territory respondents had been in practice in a RRR area for over 21 years (7%).

◇ **Intention to continue practice in a RRR area:**

Most commonly, Northern Territory respondents (33%) indicated that they intended to continue to practice in a RRR area for between three to five years. The smallest proportion of Northern Territory respondents indicated that they intended to continue to practice for over 21 years (8%). However, 78% of Northern Territory respondents were under 50 years of age and therefore unlikely to be retiring from legal practice in the near future. In total, 64% of Northern Territory 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 reason for working in a RRR area by Northern Territory respondents was the 'nature of the legal work'. Nationally, most respondents indicated that their major reason for working in the country was 'work/life balance'.

◇ **Reasons for leaving a RRR area:**

Most Northern Territory respondents (and respondents nationally) indicated that family reasons would be their main reason for moving away from a RRR area altogether. The least common reason for leaving the country for Northern Territory respondents was retirement.

◇ **Reasons for leaving current firm/organisation:**

Most commonly, Northern Territory respondents indicated that they would leave their current firm to move to a government in-house position (23%). Nationally, most practitioners indicated that they would leave their current firm to retire (20%).

◇ **Shortage of lawyers:**

Principals were asked to consider whether their practice had enough lawyers to service their client base and community generally. The Northern Territory recorded the highest shortages across all jurisdictions. Of the Northern Territory principals surveyed, 71% indicated that they did not have enough lawyers to service their current client base and 57% 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:**

Northern Territory principals indicated that the two key areas of concern for their practices are attracting additional lawyers to their practice (69%) and attracting lawyers to replace departures (69%). Nationally, the matter of most concern to principals was succession planning (71%).

◇ **Legal aid work:**

In the Northern Territory, 40% of respondents indicated that their firm undertook legal aid work. Of those respondents, 43% indicated that that their firm undertook more than 30 cases a year.

◇ **Pro bono work:**

34% of Northern Territory respondents indicated that their firm accepted matters on a pro bono basis. This figure was significantly lower than the national average of 74%. However, it is likely that the diverse make up of survey respondents affected this figure somewhat. Ordinarily, pro bono work is largely undertaken by private practitioners, but only 33% of Northern Territory survey respondents were from private practice.

◇ **Volunteer work:**

In the Northern Territory, 55% of respondents undertook additional volunteer work within their communities.



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