

Rural Practice

The newsletter of the Illinois State Bar Association's Section on Rural Practice

Rural Law Practice in the News: August 2026

BY SAM ELLIS & CARI BRETT RINCKER

State Justice Institute releases National Legal Deserts Report

In July 2026, the State Justice Institute released a national report to Congress on legal deserts in the United States. The report describes legal deserts as areas where the number of practicing attorneys is insufficient to meet community needs, with the most acute shortages appearing in rural America, Tribal communities, frontier regions, and economically distressed areas.¹

The report compiles national justice-gap research, county-level attorney data, geographic mapping, pilot program information, and interviews with national legal organizations. It reports that rural low-income households experience particularly high rates of unmet civil legal need and

emphasizes that attorney scarcity affects both civil and criminal justice systems.

For rural practitioners, the report is significant because it frames lawyer shortages as a justice-system infrastructure problem. It also gives policymakers a national reference point for evaluating loan repayment programs, court navigator models, legal aid partnerships, alternative practice models, and rural recruitment pipelines.

New York launches rural Landlord–Tenant Hub Court

On July 29, 2026, the New York State Unified Court System announced the launch of the Chemung County Landlord–Tenant Hub Court Part, a specialized court designed to consolidate residential eviction

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On June 12, 2026, Rural Practice Section Council Members met during the Annual Meeting at the Ritz-Carlton in St. Louis.

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matters filed in Chemung County town and village courts into one hub located in Elmira City Court.²

The Hub Court was created in response to rural eviction-access concerns, including geographic barriers, limited attorney availability, and inconsistent procedures across local courts. The announcement states that the new model is expected to allow Legal Assistance of Western New York to represent all eligible tenants in the consolidated proceedings.

For rural courts, the Chemung County model is worth watching because it uses court structure, rather than only attorney recruitment, to improve access. Centralized hub courts may help rural litigants by making procedures more predictable and by allowing limited legal-service providers to concentrate resources in one court setting.

Illinois Court Disability Coordinators receive statewide access training

In July 2026, the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts Access to Justice Division and the Illinois Attorney General's Disability Rights Bureau presented annual statewide training for Illinois Court Disability Coordinators. More than 100 coordinators attended regional trainings at the Williamson County Courthouse, the Springfield offices of the Administrative Office of the Illinois Courts, and the DuPage County Courthouse.³

The training covered the coordinator

role, legal obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Illinois Human Rights Act, and the Illinois Supreme Court Policy on Access for People with Disabilities. Topics included identifying accessibility barriers, responding to reasonable modification requests, ensuring effective communication, managing grievances and appeals, digital accessibility, emergency preparedness, and service animal issues.

For rural practitioners, these trainings matter because courthouse accessibility issues may be more pronounced in older or smaller facilities. Stronger statewide coordination can help rural courts provide consistent access to litigants, witnesses, jurors, and attorneys with disabilities.

Indiana Rural Practice Academy begins first program year

The Indiana State Bar Association's Rural Practice Academy began its first program year in July 2026. The yearlong cohort program is designed to help attorneys build sustainable solo and small-firm practices in rural and underserved Indiana communities through training, mentorship, peer support, and practical business resources.⁴

The Academy's first session was scheduled for July 2026 in Indianapolis and focused on the realities of Indiana's attorney shortage, solo and small firm practice, business planning, law office technology, mentorship, trust accounts, engagement letters, confidentiality, and other foundations for sustainable rural practice.

Rural Practice

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OFFICE

ILLINOIS BAR CENTER
424 S. SECOND STREET
SPRINGFIELD, IL 62701
PHONES: 217-525-1760 OR 800-252-8908
WWW.ISBA.ORG

EDITORS

Ean Albers, Hannah Brenner Johnson, Sara Ellen Stephenson Peska, Cari Brett Rincker

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

Celeste Niemann
✉ cniemann@isba.org

ART DIRECTOR

Ticara Turley
✉ tturley@isba.org

PUBLICATIONS ATTORNEY

Kelsey Burge
✉ kburge@isba.org

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Law schools and national partners continue building rural practice pipelines

The Law School Admission Council's rural access-to-justice initiative continued to highlight the role of legal education in addressing rural legal needs. The initiative describes a national effort involving LSAC, the Association of American Law Schools, law schools, chief justices, tribal courts, state and local bar associations, and other stakeholders.⁵

The effort includes a survey of law school initiatives and a planned 2026 National Rural Access to Justice Convening at the University of Nebraska College of Law. The stated goal is to develop practical, collaborative steps for addressing urgent access-to-justice challenges in rural communities.

New Mexico explores alternative pathways to address legal deserts

On July 1, 2026, TaxProf Blog published a discussion of New Mexico's efforts to

address rural justice and legal deserts after New Mexico Supreme Court justices presented the state's "Rural Justice and Modernizing the Legal Profession in New Mexico" report to a legislative interim committee.⁶

The article explains that the proposal included a skills-based assessment pathway requiring graduation from an ABA-accredited law school, supervised practice, a portfolio of lawyering experience, character-and-fitness review, and completion of the MPRE.

For rural practitioners, New Mexico's proposal is notable because it approaches the attorney-shortage problem through licensing reform and supervised practice, rather than relying only on relocation incentives. It may provide another model for states considering how to expand access while maintaining professional standards. ■

Sam Ellis is an associate attorney with Rincker Law, PLLC, practicing in the areas of food and agriculture law.

Cari Brett Rincker is the owner of Rincker Law, PLLC, a national general practice law firm concentrating in Food, Farm and FamilySM law.

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Lawyering on the Beach (Or on a Tractor): What I Learned by Attending LOTB Conference 2026

BY CARI BRETT RINCKER, ESQ.

THIS PAST APRIL, I TRADED MY rural Shelbyville, Illinois office for a stretch of Mexican coastline and joined with several other lawyers at the Lawyers on the Beach (“LOTB”) Retreat in Cancun. Before you write it off as a boondoggle, let me explain the premise—because it turned out to be some of the most useful continuing education I’ve had in years.

Being a “Lawyer on the Beach” isn’t really about the beach at all. It’s a state of mind—the belief that the practice of law can support the life you want, wherever that life happens to be. The organizers like to ask, “What is your beach?” For me, my beach is just as often on my small farm, at a goat show, or a quiet cabin as it is actual sand. For many of you in the Agricultural Law Section, I suspect your beach looks like a barn, a gravel road, or the kitchen table of a farmhouse. Wherever it is, the freedom to practice from there is worth building toward—and that freedom rests on good systems, sound processes, and, more and more, technology.

Nearly every session in Cancun circled back to one subject: artificial intelligence. Here is what I brought home.

AI isn’t coming—it’s already here

The most freeing thing I heard all week was that we are past the point of “choosing” AI. There is no opt-out button. Clients are already finding lawyers through AI tools, and the marketing experts on hand—like Colleen Young of Get Staffed Up—stressed that search engine optimization now has a sibling: “AI optimization.” Long-form, genuinely helpful content and a clear message about who you are and what you do matter more than ever. Ask yourself who the authority in your niche will be in five years. In agricultural law, where deep subject-matter credibility is everything, that question tends to answer itself.

Protect your clients (and your license)

For lawyers, the ethics piece cannot be an afterthought. A few practical takeaways: use paid, professional versions of AI tools and turn model training off. I discovered mine was already off because I pay for the professional tiers. Know your privacy settings and revisit the terms periodically, admittedly overwhelming advice even for those of us who draft privacy terms for a living. And put it in writing. At Rincker Law we are revising our retainers to include informed consent for our own use of AI, and we are weighing a separate, conspicuous addendum warning clients that their own careless use of AI could waive the attorney-client privilege.

A tool, not a toy—which means prompting is the skill

“Junk in, junk out.” The real power of these tools lives in the prompt and the information you feed them. Two lawyers can ask the same question and get wildly different results; this is no glorified Google search. Prompt engineering is a genuine, learnable skill, and I’d love to see bar associations teach it. The shortcut is specificity—tell the tool your role, your preferred tone, your learning style, and the output format you want.

Kristen David of Upleveling Your Business described three levels of AI: (1) simple question-and-answer, (2) automations, and (3) AI agents—and she insists you master Level 1 before climbing. I’ll be honest: I’m still a Level 1 beginner, using AI for job descriptions, brainstorming, and speaker introductions. And that’s okay. Like learning the Rules of Evidence, this education comes in layers, over time. One caution the room agreed on: an AI license is not an employee perk. It is a powerful tool that requires real training before you hand it to your team, and only firm-approved, paid versions should ever touch client information.

Get organized first

My biggest personal breakthrough was mundane but transformative: organization. I built a firm-wide “AI knowledge base”—a master document describing our mission, brand voice, client profiles, services, and team—so the tool actually understands who we are. A tip I wish I’d known sooner: you can tell it to wait until you finish uploading everything before it analyzes, then ask for a tidy summary. I also gave my projects a uniform numbering system that mirrors our practice areas and our task-management software, with private spaces my team can’t see and shared ones they can. Don’t assume the tool remembers anything, though—each new project needs its own information uploaded.

The real game-changer: Skills and agents

The moment it clicked was watching a colleague use “Skills” in an AI agent to finish, over a single lunch, a file-renaming cleanup project she’d been chasing for months. Agents can be taught repeatable workflows—scanning and renaming documents, moving them to the right folder, drafting routine correspondence—and I now expect a market where firms buy and sell ready-made legal Skills the way we once bought form books. For solo and small ag-law practices without a big support staff, this is the closest thing to hiring help that I’ve seen.

Freedom builds value

Victoria Collier of Quid Pro Quo drove home a point that should resonate in this Section: roughly 34% of lawyers are 56 or older. Many of us will eventually sell or transition our practices—just as our farming clients wrestle with succession. The lesson is the same on both sides of that table. A practice built on documented systems, playbooks, and low overhead is worth far more than one that lives entirely in the owner’s head. The more enslaved

you are to your practice, the less valuable it is to a buyer—and the less it resembles a “beach” of any kind.

A little passive income, too

Finally, Sonia Lakhany of 4L reminded us that the expertise we already have can become templates, e-books, or courses. Do your market research first, and consider housing that revenue in a separate brand and entity.

Back to the beach

The biggest shift for me wasn’t any single app—it was mindset. AI will not replace lawyers; if anything, our clients will need our human discernment and judgment more than ever. But the lawyers who thrive will be the ones who use these tools to build a practice flexible enough to run from a beach, a tractor, or a secluded cabin. That is a goal worth chasing—whatever your beach looks like. ■

I have no financial relationship with Lawyers on the Beach and am not part of any affiliate program. If you’d like to attend next year, it will be held May 3–7, 2027; you can learn more at legallypinktravel.net/lotb2027. I cannot recommend it more highly. I’m no tech guru, so if you have advanced questions, please consult one—I’m happy to share referrals to my resources.

Cari B. Rincker
Licensed in IL, NY, NJ, CT, TX, KY & DC
Founder, Rincker Law, PLLC
cari@rinckerlaw.com • www.rinckerlaw.com •
Call/Text (217) 531-2179

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Domestic Violence and Attorney Solicitation

BY MAXWELL SHARKEY

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of Conduct 7.3 covers the solicitation of clients by attorneys.¹ The most recent comment, #10, addresses Paragraph (b)(3) which prohibits solicitation of prospective clients in proceedings where the contact poses a substantial risk of physical harm to the non-prospective client. This comment and rule do not cover domestic relations cases. This currently allows attorneys to solicit prospective clients when their spouse files for divorce and parentage cases. Attorneys who solicit through mail often will then send a letter to the marital residence or household where the parties primarily resided. At times, this removes autonomy from the filing spouse from being able to share the news in a safe manner.

Across the country spouses are murdered after filing for divorce.² With attorneys having the avenue of solicitation via mail on divorce cases, the spouse filing for divorce has a substantial risk of physical harm, given that the filing of divorce could cause the other spouse to act erratic or with heightened emotions. The service that some attorneys use to retrieve cases may allow them to send the letter to the respondent within 24 hours of filing. This does not give spouses ample time to prepare to safely inform their spouse or use the proper method of service.

In 2015, Michigan tackled this very issue in their Senate.³ After passing the Senate, the House of Representatives referred it to Committee on Judiciary. The bill proposes, rather than a total ban on solicitation in these cases, there needs to be a waiting period. It appears that as Michigan's Professional Rules on solicitation currently stand, the rules are

strict and do not permit any solicitation to any specific recipient known to need legal services.⁴ There is a comment that appears to have followed the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Shapero v. Kentucky Bar Association*,⁵ where the Court held that Kentucky's prohibition on all solicitation directed to a specific recipient whom the lawyer has no family or prior professional relationship with is not an appropriate rule. Michigan's work around emphasizes the importance of advertising versus impermissible direct contact. Michigan's rule creates safeguards for the contact that should be protected while allowing free speech to remain.

Michigan is not the only state whose rules restrict these types of solicitations. Nevada, similarly to Michigan, creates an approach that outlines that solicitation should be intended for the general public not one known in a particular matter.⁶ Sixteen states⁷ prohibit solicitation when, "the lawyer knows or reasonably should know that the physical, emotional, or mental state of the person makes it unlikely that the person would exercise reasonable judgment in employing a lawyer."⁸ This could arguably be applied to domestic relations cases as a divorce can be a highly emotionally charged situation. Florida has a similar rule and also encapsulates concerns for a request for protection against physical violence. Maine's language creates factors to evaluate after a solicitation is called into question, those being the physical and emotional state of the prospective client.⁹ Pennsylvania explicitly references domestic relations actions and states that lawyers need to wait until the proof of services appears on the docket before the contact occurs with the respondent.¹⁰ Lastly, Tennessee creates a thirty-day waiting period for divorce and

legal separation cases.¹¹

Illinois should follow suit with Pennsylvania and Tennessee to create time limitations for solicitation in domestic relations cases. This is a chance for Illinois to be proactive rather than implementing this after more deaths. Illinois has a duty to prevent potential domestic violence from occurring due to the spouse finding out about the proceedings by lawyers sending mail letting partners know a proceeding has been filed. ■

Maxwell Sharkey is an associate attorney with the firm Mirabella, Kincaid, Frederick & Mirabella, LLC, practicing in family law and child advocacy.

This article was originally published in Family Law (July 2026, Vol. 70, No. 1), the newsletter of ISBA's Section on Family Law.

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Custom ChatGPTs: Navigating Legal and Ethical Compliance for Public-Facing AI Tools

BY CAROLYN ELEFANT

Abstract

This article explores the legal and ethical considerations lawyers must address when creating custom versions of ChatGPT for public use. It discusses the potential applications of these tools, such as educating clients on legal matters or providing preliminary advice to landlords. The article outlines key ethical requirements, including AI disclosure, supervision, attorney/client relationship, confidentiality, and unauthorized practice of law (UPL). It also examines legal and business concerns related to licensing, training materials, and liability for inaccurate responses. Through a

review of state ethics guidelines and expert opinions, the article offers practical solutions to ensure compliance and protect both users and legal practitioners.

So, you want to build and launch a custom version of ChatGPT to share with your law firm's clients. Maybe you want to create a platform trained on your firm's extensive database of Colorado child support cases to educate clients on factors that courts may apply in modifying an existing arrangement. Or maybe you want to respond to questions from mom-and-pop landlords about evicting a lessee who won't pay or offer a checklist on documents to gather for a lawsuit after being rear-ended in an auto accident.

With ChatGPT custom tools, the possibilities to create a tool to expand access to justice, educate the public, or generate leads are endless. But what's also endless are the myriad of legal and ethics questions raised when lawyers create custom GPTs for use by the public. So here's a quick list of issues and solutions if you choose to build a public-facing GPT.

Legal ethics requirements

Sources: Ethics guidance from California, Florida, New Jersey, NYSBA, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky.

AI Disclosure Requirements: Several states require disclosure of AI use to clients, or clarification that a chat-bot is a



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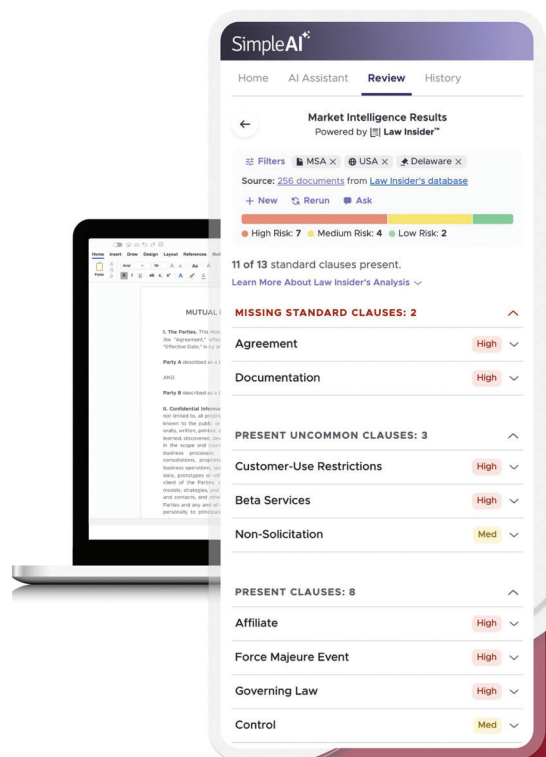
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machine and not human. An easy fix: use the custom GPT instructions to deliver an appropriate disclosure when users submit a request.

Duty to Supervise: Most states require lawyers to supervise and oversee AI use. But how to supervise a public-facing GPT when the sponsoring firm can't monitor either queries received or responses delivered? One option: constantly test the GPT with queries anticipated from users and iterate revisions as needed. And as further protection, warn users that the GPT results aren't monitored for accuracy and can't be relied on without consulting with a lawyer. Together, ongoing testing and disclosure of lack of monitoring should suffice to discharge the duty to supervise obligation.

Attorney-Client Relationship and Confidentiality: As with any interactive web form or chat bot, a public GPT should clarify that no attorney client relationship is formed when a query is submitted. And to ensure preservation of confidentiality, a GPT should caution users against submitting detailed personal information.

Unauthorized Practice of Law: [Sources: Joseph Avery et. al., Chat GPT Esq.: Recasting UPL in an AI Age (2024); Ed Walters, Regulating UPL in an Age of AI (2024); Thomas Spahn, Is Your AI Guilty of UPL? (2018)] Does a custom ChatGPT constitute unauthorized practice of law? Most experts concur that the law is unclear, though it bears noting that most UPL statutes expressly refer to persons engaged in law practice, not machines.

That said, Ed Walters's article suggests that software products may be insulated from UPL violations with clear disclaimers that they provide general information, not advice, and make clear that responses are generated by a machine, not a live attorney.

Legal and business considerations

Licenses and Training Material: Lawyers can upload caselaw, statutes and all kinds of practice materials to train and refine custom GPTs. But it's important to review the terms of licenses covering third-party materials like treatises or CLE content that you may want to include. Fortunately, few resources outright prohibit their use for AI-training...yet. Absent an express prohibition on use for training, courts would evaluate whether the content produced is derivative of the training material—an issue now wending its way through the courts. For added protection, custom GPTs can be instructed not to spew out word-for-word content from training material. Finally, if all else fails, bear in mind that Open AI has promised to defend customers against copyright claims.

Privacy of Training Materials: It goes without saying that lawyers shouldn't use confidential client materials for training. That said, lawyers may want to train custom GPTs on internal, proprietary content developed by the firm that they don't want Open AI to access for its own training. Fortunately, Open AI offers a privacy option to protect content uploaded for training—and there are other technical

hacks to prevent users from reverse-engineering your custom GPT.

Liability for Inaccurate Responses:

Recently, Canada Air was required to honor a fare that its chatbot erroneously provided to a customer. Similar cases are likely as consumers overwhelmingly believe that the company sponsoring the chatbot and not the technology is to blame for errors. Here again, clear disclosures that results may not be accurate coupled with warnings to consult with an attorney before taking action can help ward off liability.

Conclusion

Creating a custom ChatGPT for public use offers significant potential to expand access to legal information and generate client leads. However, it also presents a complex array of legal and ethical challenges. Lawyers must ensure proper AI disclosure, maintain oversight to fulfill their duty to supervise, and clearly communicate that no attorney-client relationship is formed through the tool. Additionally, safeguards must be implemented to avoid unauthorized practice of law and protect confidentiality. By addressing these issues and incorporating robust disclaimers, legal professionals can responsibly leverage AI technology to enhance their services while mitigating risks. ■

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