

IU McKinney Launches Rural Justice Initiative to Support Underserved Communities



Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law is dedicated to promoting access to justice, serving the legal profession, and positively impacting the state of Indiana, the nation, and the world. This commitment is deeply embedded in the school's strategic plan, adopted in fall 2023. The plan outlines various goals, including a strong focus on ensuring the availability of lawyers and legal services in all parts of Indiana, with a special emphasis on rural and urban areas facing significant needs.

One of the pressing challenges in Indiana is the severe shortage of attorneys practicing in rural counties. Several communities report having only a handful of practicing lawyers. To address this issue, IU McKinney established the Supporting Rural Justice Initiative, which is also implemented at the IU Maurer School of Law. The initiative aims to introduce law students to the fulfilling opportunities and rewarding careers that await them in rural communities.

Now entering its fifth year, the Supporting Rural Justice Initiative has placed seven students in counties across Indiana for the summer. Initially, the program focused on student placements with judges. Over time, it expanded to include rising third-year students working as certified legal interns with prosecutor and public defender offices in rural counties. These participating students commit to dedicating at least 200 hours during the summer. Certified legal interns have the opportunity to meet and represent clients under attorney supervision, while students working with judges provide valuable research and analysis on specific legal topics, assist in updating court rules and forms for self-represented litigants, and contribute to tasks that enhance court functionality and student learning.

This initiative provides IU McKinney students with exceptional legal experience and an immersive understanding of rural practice's rhythms, challenges, and rewards. Some students who hail from rural parts of Indiana seize the opportunity to return to their hometowns for the summer and work within or near their local legal systems. For others, this marks their first extended exposure to rural Indiana. Regardless of their backgrounds, students who participated in the program express feeling warmly welcomed and speak highly of the meaningful contributions they made.

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IU McKinney extends its heartfelt gratitude to the judges and supervising lawyers, many of whom are alumni of the school, for their invaluable support. Judge Jason Thompson of White Circuit Court, who grew up on a farm near Idaville, has hosted law students in his court twice since the initiative's inception. Judge Thompson emphasizes the importance of law students' presence in providing vital support to the local justice system. He hopes that the program inspires students to contemplate returning to their hometown communities and serving the needs of their fellow residents, while also gaining an insightful behind-the-scenes perspective on judicial administration in rural counties.

Leading the Rural Justice Initiative is Professor Joel Schumm, the director of the law school's Judicial Externship Program. He oversees the program's operations, while a committee consisting of Professor Lahny Silva and Assistant Dean Sonja Rice assists in selecting each year's externs from a pool of highly qualified student applicants. In addition to the professional skills and exposure they gain, participating students earn experiential credits toward their degree and receive a stipend for their externship. Professor Schumm, who hails from a rural Ohio county bordering Indiana, is deeply passionate about the school's commitment to rural populations and their access to legal services. He believes that this program offers critical assistance to underserved legal markets during the summer and serves as an important pipeline to address the pressing need for more lawyers in numerous rural counties throughout the state. In fact, Professor Schumm will be among the many participants attending a full-day summit for rural justice in Wabash on October 13.

Since its inception, nearly 30 IU McKinney Law students have participated in the Rural Justice Initiative. However, the school acknowledges that more can and should be done. In collaboration with the IU Maurer School of Law, IU McKinney remains dedicated to expanding the program further and increasing its service to Indiana and its most vulnerable communities. As Indiana's law school, they strive to uphold their commitment to the state on a daily basis, ensuring that justice is accessible to all.

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