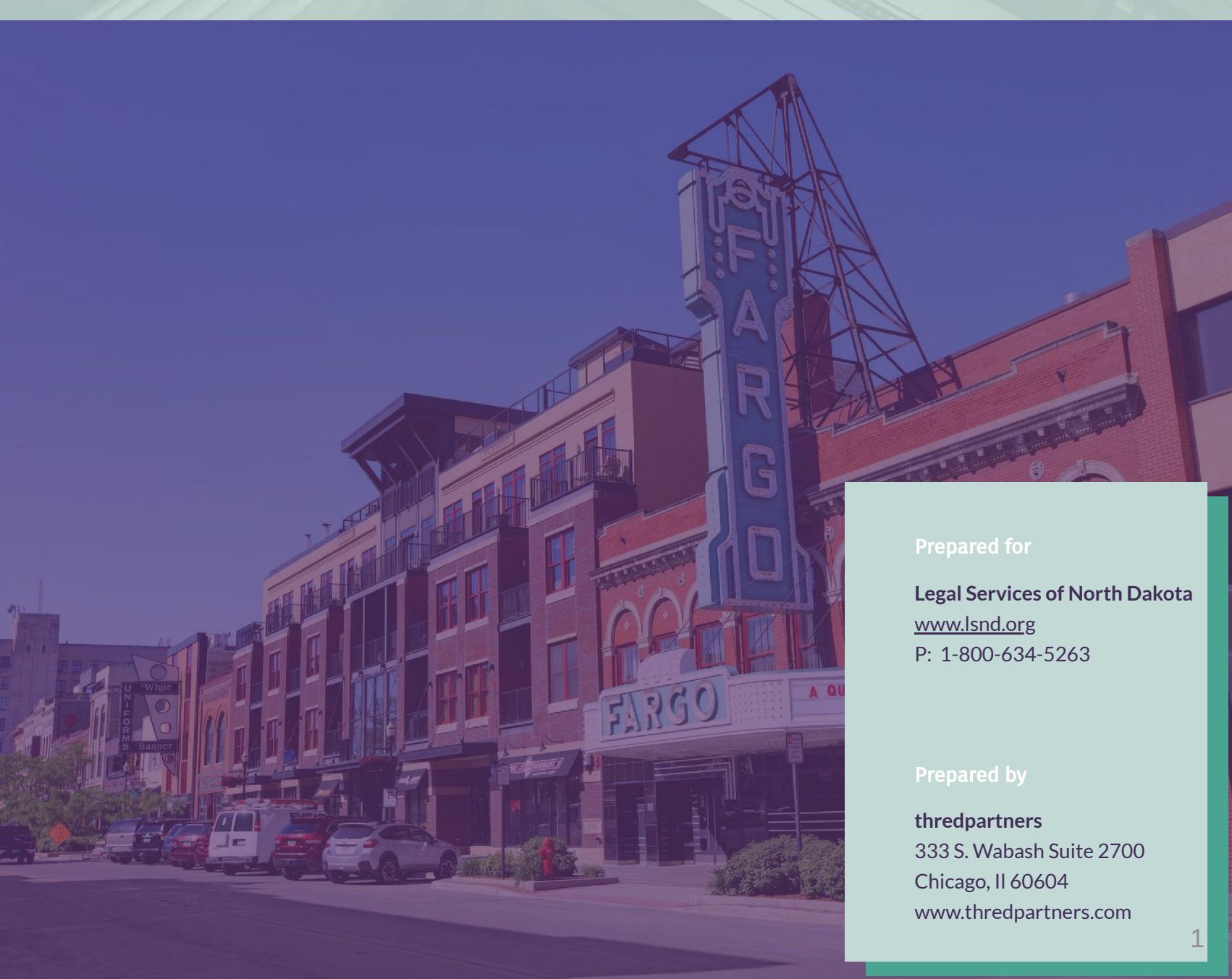




Legal Services of North Dakota

# 2024 Legal Needs Assessment Report



Prepared for

Legal Services of North Dakota

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# Executive Summary & Key Take Aways

Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND) conducted a comprehensive Community Legal Needs Assessment from August to December 2024, employing an inclusive approach to engage diverse stakeholders.

We engaged stakeholders from various regions of North Dakota served by LSND focusing on those in need of legal services, those who provide legal services, and those who partner with LSND and the clients they serve. The assessment utilized data from an electronic (online) survey, one-on-one interviews, and insights from focus groups. Targeted surveys were deployed to clients, community members, community partners, and legal service providers. The surveys and interviews aimed to identify and understand the legal needs of low-income individuals and families, along with the legal aid barriers, facilitators, and motivators encountered by those in need, those who provide, and those who partner.

These stakeholders included community members, partner organizations, and legal professionals. Their contributions will play a pivotal role in shaping LSND's strategic direction and addressing critical barriers to justice by:

-  Identifying key legal service gaps and underserved populations.
-  Highlighting systemic barriers to accessing justice, including cost, awareness, and geographic challenges.
-  Elevating the voices of vulnerable communities to inform LSND's priorities.
-  Generating actionable insights to guide programmatic, outreach, and capacity-building efforts.

The assessment provides a robust foundation for decision-making. This report encompasses detailed findings, including demographic profiles, participant feedback, and analysis of legal needs and barriers.

*'[I] Was evicted and have a no trespass order, but I own the trailer and am being stopped from taking care of it and retrieving my belongings'*

~ Survey Participant

**Rural Barriers to Justice:** North Dakota's rural nature poses significant challenges to accessing legal aid, particularly for elderly residents, low-income families, and those without reliable transportation. Financial eligibility criteria exclude many who cannot afford private attorneys, creating a justice gap for individuals ineligible for traditional legal aid services.

**Concentration of Legal Issues in Housing and Family Law:** Family-related issues (custody, domestic abuse, divorce) and housing instability dominate legal needs, mirroring LSND's recent case data. Women and low-income households appear to disproportionately experience multiple legal challenges, underscoring the need for targeted legal representation and advocacy.

**Veteran-Specific Barriers to Justice:** North Dakota's veterans, 6.6% of the adult population, face unique legal challenges, including housing instability, employment discrimination, and difficulty accessing mental health care. High rates of PTSD, depression, and substance abuse further amplify these needs. Expanding LSND's partnerships with veteran-focused organizations and providing specialized legal clinics can bridge the justice gap and address critical unmet needs.

**Barriers to Justice for Immigrants:** North Dakota's growing immigrant population faces significant legal challenges, including wage theft, housing discrimination, and family reunification. While federally funded legal aid cannot assist with most immigration status cases, it can address other critical civil legal issues affecting documented immigrants, such as employment rights, landlord-tenant disputes, and access to public benefits. Enhancing LSND's multilingual resources, community outreach, and partnerships with immigrant advocacy organizations can bridge gaps and improve legal support for this population.

**The Impact of Poverty and Defining "How Many Poor is Too Many":** Poverty in North Dakota is particularly severe in rural areas, where limited resources and geographic isolation exacerbate legal and economic challenges. Approximately 24% of households are classified as Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), meaning they struggle to meet basic needs despite being employed. These households often fall into the justice gap, unable to qualify for legal aid yet lacking the resources to afford private legal representation.



This gap leads to cascading issues such as eviction, debt collection, and other legal problems that further entrench poverty. Addressing these challenges requires expanding legal aid services, increasing rural outreach, and fostering partnerships to tackle the compounded burdens North Dakota's underserved communities face.

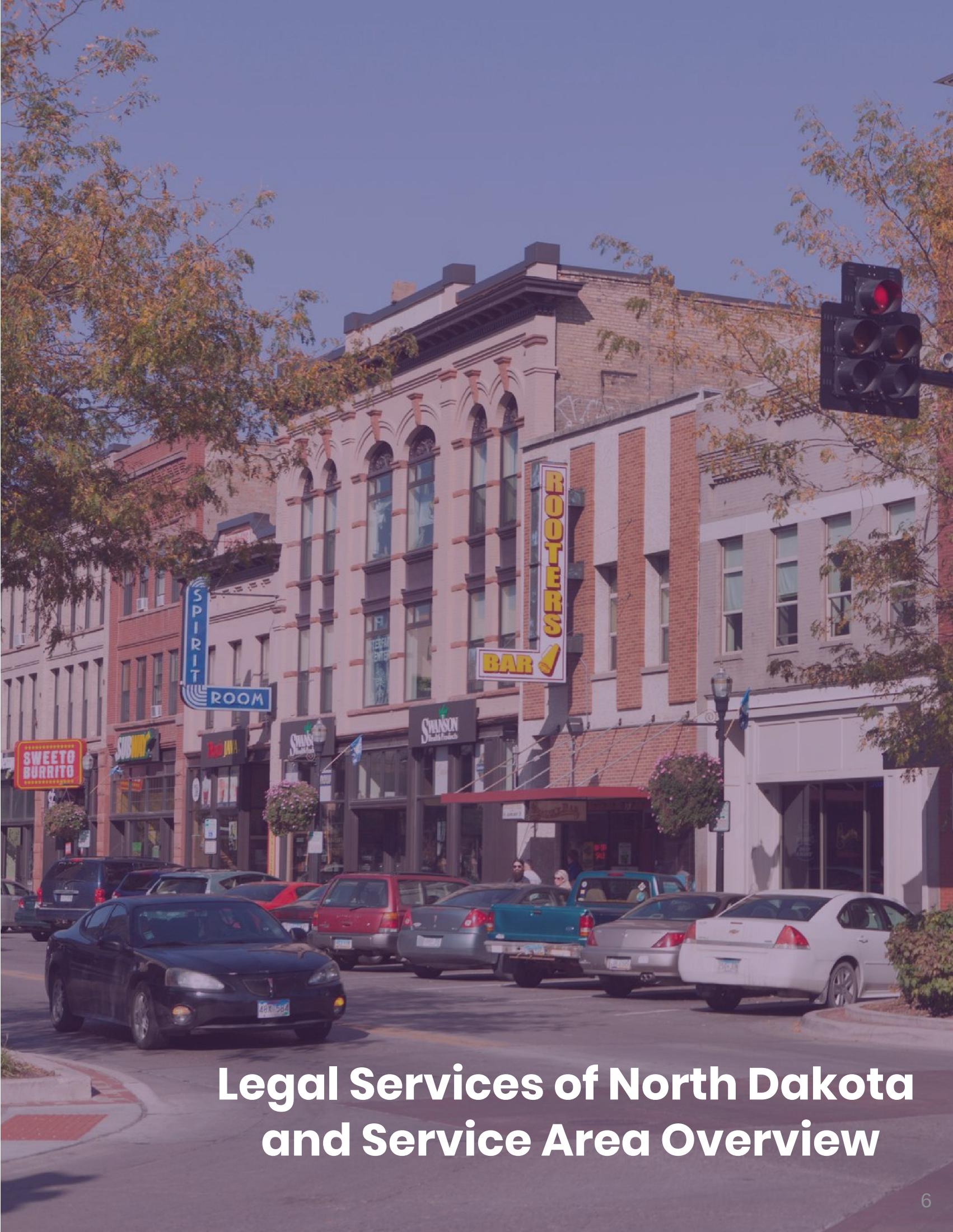
**Digital Equity and Access to Justice:** While North Dakota leads in broadband access, digital literacy and access to affordable devices remain barriers for vulnerable populations. Expanding virtual legal services, remote consultations, and public access to technology can bridge gaps and improve



**Interconnected Legal and Social Challenges:** Legal issues often overlap with broader social challenges, including mental health, economic instability, and lack of housing. Strengthening partnerships and referral systems with non-legal service providers can enhance holistic support for individuals in crisis.



**Natural Disaster Preparedness:** North Dakota's climate disasters have doubled in frequency, with 24 major events since 1980 causing over \$1 billion in losses. Low-income, rural, elderly, and Native American communities face the greatest risks due to limited resources, infrastructure, and emergency response access. Severe winter storms, flooding, and wildfires further threaten these populations, underscoring the urgent need for targeted preparedness, resource allocation, and legal aid access.



# Legal Services of North Dakota and Service Area Overview



## Population

North Dakota is a predominantly rural state with a population of approximately 780,000 people, spread across an expansive area of about 70,000 square miles, resulting in a low population density of roughly 11.4 people per square mile. While urban centers such as Fargo, Bismarck, Grand Forks, and Minot serve as hubs of economic and social activity, a significant portion of the population resides in small towns and rural communities. This vast geography and dispersed population present unique challenges in ensuring equitable access to services, particularly in remote regions.

## Demographic Composition

The state's demographic makeup is predominantly White, accounting for approximately 83.89% of the population. Other racial and ethnic groups include:

- Native American: 4.48%
- Black or African American: 3.23%
- Asian: 1.35%
- Hispanic or Latino (of any race): 5.0%

The median age in North Dakota is 35.7 years, reflecting a relatively young population.

## Economic Landscape

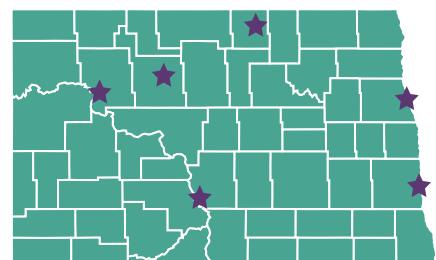
North Dakota's economy is diverse, with several key industries driving growth:

- Energy Sector: The state is a significant producer of oil and natural gas, particularly from the Bakken Formation, making it the third-largest oil-producing state in the U.S. The mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction industry contributed approximately \$10.63 billion to the state's GDP in 2023.
- Agriculture: Agriculture remains a cornerstone of North Dakota's economy. The state leads the nation in the production of spring wheat and sunflowers and has been the top honey-producing state for 19 consecutive years.
- Manufacturing and Technology: Emerging sectors such as unmanned aerial systems (UAS), advanced manufacturing, and technology are gaining prominence, supported by initiatives like Innovate ND, which provides resources to turn innovative ideas into profitable businesses.

Despite the robust economic indicators, including a low unemployment rate of 2.5%, the state's rural nature means that many residents in isolated areas face systemic barriers to accessing essential services, including legal assistance.

## Legal Services of North Dakota

Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND) provides free civil legal assistance to the state's most vulnerable populations, ensuring access to justice regardless of income or geography. LSND serves communities statewide, focusing on areas highly vulnerable to systemic barriers, including rural regions where geographic isolation and limited resources compound access challenges. This Legal Needs Assessment aims to identify unmet civil legal needs across the state, with special attention to the populations and areas most affected by economic hardship, isolation, and systemic inequities.



# Social Vulnerability Index (svi)

*'[I] Was evicted and have a no trespass order, but I own the trailer and am being stopped from taking care of it and retrieving my belongings'*

~ Survey Participant

The Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2011 to assess the resilience of communities when confronted with external stresses on human health, such as natural disasters or disease outbreaks.

The SVI evaluates communities based on 15 social factors, grouped into four themes:

**Socioeconomic Status:** Includes variables like income, employment, and education.

**Household Composition & Disability:** Considers factors such as age, disability status, and single-parent households.

**Minority Status & Language:** Assesses minority populations and English proficiency.

**Housing Type & Transportation:** Evaluates housing structures, crowding, and access to transportation.

Each county receives rankings for these themes, as well as an overall SVI score, which ranges from 0 (least vulnerable) to 1 (most vulnerable). These scores are used to guide the allocation of resources, emergency response planning, and service support strategies.

The 2022 Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) highlights significant disparities in social vulnerability across North Dakota. Counties with the greatest vulnerability remained consistent when controlling for population size, while the top ten list of counties with lower vulnerability shifted. This finding could indicate that high social vulnerability in North Dakota is concentrated in specific areas irrespective of population size, particularly in counties like Sioux, Rolette, and Benson. These counties are characterized by a combination of high levels of poverty, minority status (including significant Indigenous populations), and language barriers, as well as other socioeconomic challenges.

The limited shift in counties with lower vulnerability when controlling for population size suggests that sparsely populated counties (e.g., Slope and Billings) may have low vulnerability scores largely due to their small and less diverse populations. However, counties with slightly larger populations (greater than 2,500) are more likely to reflect a broader range of social and economic conditions, leading to slightly higher vulnerability scores.

# Social Vulnerability Index (svi)

In the 2022 SVI, North Dakota's counties exhibit varying levels of social vulnerability. The table below summarizes the SVI for the ten lowest counties in North Dakota.

County	Estimated Total Pop	County Size (sq mi)	Overall Vulnerability Score	Socio-Economic Status	Household Composition & Disability	Minority Status & Language	Housing Type & Transportation
Benson County	5960	1389	0.74	0.41	0.86	0.92	0.81
Dunn County	4049	2008	0.41	0.20	0.58	0.55	0.59
Eddy County	2345	630	0.41	0.21	0.56	0.27	0.73
McKenzie County	14081	2760	0.47	0.34	0.11	0.60	0.87
Mounttrail County	9648	1825	0.72	0.43	0.79	0.81	0.81
Ramsey County	11613	1185	0.47	0.22	0.58	0.50	0.77
Rolette County	12292	903	0.89	0.84	0.68	0.99	0.89
Sioux County	3896	1094	0.92	0.96	0.62	0.99	0.81
Stutsman County	21609	2222	0.48	0.48	0.22	0.25	0.67
Williams County	39076	2078	0.51	0.23	0.48	0.58	0.88

# **Critical Challenges Across North Dakota**





# Veterans' Legal and Social Challenges

Veterans, who comprise 6.6% of North Dakota's adult population, face significant legal and social challenges as they transition to civilian life. Insights from focus groups and interviews revealed that housing instability, including high rates of homelessness and eviction, is a pressing issue for many veterans. Barriers such as limited access to affordable housing and insufficient shelter resources exacerbate their vulnerability. Additionally, veterans experience high rates of mental health conditions like PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, which often intersect with legal challenges, including navigating VA benefits, disability claims, and employment discrimination.

These compounded issues highlight the urgent need for targeted support. By expanding collaborations with veteran-focused organizations and offering specialized legal clinics, LSND can address these critical gaps, providing much-needed advocacy and bridging the justice gap for this vulnerable population.

# Concentration of Legal Issues in Housing and Family Law

Family law and housing instability represent the most pressing legal needs in North Dakota, as reflected in LSND's recent case data and community feedback. Issues such as child custody disputes, domestic abuse, divorce, and tenant-landlord conflicts dominate the legal landscape for many vulnerable populations. These challenges are particularly acute for women and low-income households, who disproportionately face multiple legal crises simultaneously. For example, domestic abuse survivors often encounter cascading issues, including the need for protective orders, child custody modifications, and access to safe housing, which can overwhelm their ability to navigate the legal system effectively.

Housing instability compounds these challenges, with rising rental costs, limited affordable housing options, and landlord-tenant disputes placing many households at risk of eviction or homelessness. Women, particularly single mothers, are overrepresented among those experiencing both family law and housing-related legal issues. The overlap between these areas highlights the critical need for targeted legal representation and advocacy to address intersecting vulnerabilities. Providing comprehensive legal support in these areas stabilizes families and individuals and mitigates unresolved legal issues' broader social and economic impacts. Strengthening LSND's capacity to address family and housing law needs through expanded outreach, dedicated legal clinics, and partnerships with local organizations can help ensure these critical issues are met with timely and practical support. By focusing on these high-need areas, LSND can deliver impactful, life-changing services to those most at risk, creating pathways to stability and justice for North Dakota's most vulnerable residents.









## Rural Barriers to Justice

North Dakota's rural communities offer a beautiful place to live, with scenic landscapes, close-knit neighborhoods, and health outcomes that rank among the top 15 states nationwide. However, the state's rural nature also presents significant obstacles to accessing legal aid, particularly for elderly residents, low-income families, and individuals without reliable transportation.

Vast geographic distances and a scarcity of legal professionals in rural areas often leave vulnerable populations without the resources to address critical legal issues. Limited or nonexistent public transportation exacerbates isolation, making it difficult for residents to attend court hearings, meet with attorneys, or access legal clinics.

Strict financial eligibility criteria for legal aid exclude many who fall into the "justice gap"—those who earn too much to qualify for assistance but cannot afford private attorneys. Technological barriers, such as inconsistent digital literacy or device access, persist despite the state's leadership in broadband availability. These challenges underscore the need for innovative solutions, including expanded outreach, mobile legal services, and community partnerships, to ensure equitable access to justice for all North Dakotans.

# Immigrant Population in North Dakota

**Growing Immigrant Community:** North Dakota's immigrant population has grown steadily due to economic opportunities, particularly in the agriculture and energy sectors. However, this growth has highlighted significant legal and social support services gaps.

**Language and Cultural Barriers:** Limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the U.S. legal system hinder immigrants' access to justice. These challenges are compounded for refugees and asylum seekers, who face additional complexities in immigration law.

**Legal Issues Faced by Immigrants:** Common legal concerns include wage theft, housing discrimination, family reunification, visa applications, and navigating citizenship pathways.

**Addressing Barriers:** Increasing multilingual legal resources, partnering with immigrant advocacy organizations, and offering targeted outreach programs can help address the specific needs of immigrant communities.





# The Impact of Poverty and Defining "How Many Poor is Too Many"

Despite North Dakota's relatively low poverty rate of 10.5%, financial insecurity remains a pervasive issue, with 24% of households classified as ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). These households earn above federal poverty thresholds but struggle to meet basic needs such as housing, food, and healthcare. This precarious financial situation often triggers cascading legal challenges, including eviction, debt collection, family law disputes, and limited access to public benefits. Individuals caught in this "justice gap" cannot qualify for free legal aid yet cannot afford private attorneys, leaving critical legal issues unresolved and perpetuating cycles of instability and hardship.

	NORTH DAKOTA	UNITED STATES
Cost of Living Index	84.61	100
% Households Below Poverty Level	10.50%	11.10%
ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed)	24%	42%
Violent Crime per 100,000 People	280	381
Total Homeless per 100,000 People	78.3	200
Median Household Income	\$76,525	\$80,610
Median Monthly Rent	\$912	\$2,015
Median House Value	\$263,410	\$356,026

These challenges are especially pronounced in rural communities, where geographic isolation, limited resources, and a lack of transportation amplify economic and legal burdens. Residents in these areas face more incredible difficulty accessing essential services, exacerbating their vulnerability to financial strain and legal crises. The intersection of poverty and legal needs frequently forces individuals to sacrifice essentials like food and healthcare, creating compounding hardships that ripple through families and communities. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires a holistic approach, including expanding legal aid eligibility to encompass the justice gap population, tailoring outreach to the unique needs of rural residents, and fostering partnerships with non-legal social service providers. By addressing the compounded burdens of poverty and isolation, North Dakota can take meaningful steps to ensure equitable access to justice and break the cycle of financial and legal insecurity for its most vulnerable populations.









# Digital Equity and Access to Justice

North Dakota is a national leader in broadband access, with over 95% of households capable of achieving speeds of at least 100 Mbps and more than 70% able to access 1 Gbps service. Rural residents benefit from this infrastructure, with 76.6% of rural households having access to high-quality fiber broadband, significantly surpassing the national rural average of 19.1%. Among LSND's community survey respondents, 92% reported having internet access, highlighting the potential for technology to bridge geographical barriers and expand access to justice, healthcare, and education for low-income and vulnerable populations.

However, digital infrastructure alone is not enough. Consistent access to affordable devices and digital literacy challenges prevent many from fully utilizing available broadband services. These barriers are particularly pronounced among homeless individuals and other marginalized groups, who often rely on public access points with significant limitations, such as restricted hours and lack of privacy. To ensure equitable access, North Dakota must address these gaps through targeted initiatives, such as expanding virtual legal services, enhancing remote consultations, and increasing the availability of affordable devices and digital literacy training. Achieving digital equity will require sustained collaboration among state agencies, nonprofits, and community organizations, ensuring the state's robust broadband infrastructure translates into meaningful access to justice and essential services for all residents, particularly those most in need.

# Interconnected Legal and Social Challenges:

Legal issues in North Dakota often intertwine with broader social challenges such as mental health crises, economic instability, housing insecurity, and limited access to healthcare. These overlapping challenges amplify the vulnerabilities of individuals and families, creating a cycle of instability that cannot be addressed through isolated interventions. Insights from community needs assessments conducted by the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine & Health Sciences (2023) and the Community Action Partnership of North Dakota in conjunction with North Dakota State University (NDSU) and the North Dakota Department of Commerce, Division of Community Services (2023) underscore the critical need for holistic approaches that integrate legal aid with social support systems. LSND community members and stakeholders consistently highlighted these intersections, emphasizing that individuals facing legal issues frequently require access to multiple services, such as housing assistance, mental health care, and financial counseling.

Despite the recognized importance of collaboration, focus groups revealed a gap in direct referral systems between non-legal service providers and legal aid organizations. This disconnect, often driven by capacity and funding limitations, weakens the safety net for vulnerable populations. LSND community members, partners, and other stakeholders amplified the information from these two reports. Key themes from the community assessments reinforce the urgency of a multi-faceted strategy:

- **Employment:** Addressing job availability, workforce development, and livable wages to improve economic stability for individuals and families.
- **Income and Asset-Building:** Providing opportunities for financial literacy, savings programs, and asset-building initiatives to support economic self-sufficiency.
- **Education:** Enhancing access to quality education, childcare services, and workforce training to empower individuals and families.
- **Food Insecurity:** Tackling hunger and ensuring access to affordable and nutritious food for vulnerable populations.
- **Housing Insecurity (i.e., Rental Assistance):** Expanding affordable housing options and rental assistance programs to address persistent housing challenges.
- **Health and Social/Behavior Development:**
- **Mental Health Services:** Ensuring access to mental health providers and treatment for depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders.
- **Primary Care Providers and Nurses:** Improving healthcare staffing, particularly in rural areas.
- **Affordable Healthcare:** Reducing costs for insurance, services, and medications.
- **Dental Insurance/Affordable Dental Care:** Addressing gaps in oral health care access.
- **Attracting and Retaining Young Families:** Supporting population sustainability through family-friendly policies, jobs, housing, and community resources.
- **Resources for the Elderly:** Providing home-based care and support to enable seniors to live independently.
- **Access to Transportation:** Reducing transportation barriers that limit access to healthcare, education, employment, and other essential services.
- **Alcohol and Substance Use/Abuse:** Strengthening prevention, education, and treatment efforts for both youth and adults.
- **Civic Engagement:** Encouraging participation in community decision-making and support networks to foster connectedness and resilience.
- **Other Supports:** Addressing miscellaneous needs, such as public safety and access to specialized care, to ensure a comprehensive safety net for vulnerable populations.

Poverty in North Dakota is particularly severe in rural areas, where limited resources and geographic isolation exacerbate legal and economic challenges. Approximately 24% of households are classified as Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE), meaning they struggle to meet basic needs despite being employed. These households often fall into the justice gap, unable to qualify for legal aid yet lacking the resources to afford private legal representation.

These findings reveal a stark perception of inequality in the civil legal system and emphasize the vital role LSND plays in bridging systemic gaps. Legal aid strengthens confidence in the system and fosters a more equitable and inclusive society by providing trusted representation and addressing barriers to justice.





# Conclusion

The Legal Services of North Dakota (LSND) Community Legal Needs Assessment highlights the critical legal challenges faced by North Dakota's most vulnerable populations. From rural barriers and housing instability to the unique legal needs of veterans and immigrants, the findings underscore the urgency of addressing systemic inequalities in access to justice. The impact of poverty, geographic isolation, and digital disparities further complicate the ability of underserved communities to secure legal support, reinforcing the need for expanded outreach, strategic partnerships, and innovative service delivery models.

This report serves as a call to action for LSND and its stakeholders. It provides a data-driven foundation for strengthening legal aid efforts, advocating for policy reforms, and fostering collaborative solutions that bridge service gaps. By leveraging these insights, LSND is committed to ensuring that all North Dakotans—regardless of income, location, or background—can access the legal resources they need to protect their rights and build stable futures.

Through partnerships, advocacy, and community-driven solutions, LSND will continue to champion justice, equity, and dignity for all

# Thank You & Call to Action

LSND extends its gratitude to the staff, partners, and community members who contributed to this report. Over the past ## months, the LSND Strategic Planning Committee, staff, Board of Directors, and community partners have demonstrated unwavering dedication to serving North Dakota. Community members generously shared their time through survey responses and focus groups, providing critical insights for this needs assessment.

The findings of this assessment underscore that the challenges our communities face—systemic barriers, natural disasters, inflation, poverty, housing instability, and struggling infrastructure—are too complex for any one organization to solve alone. We are inspired not only by the commitment of those who serve LSND community members each day but also by the resilience of the community members themselves, who fight daily to create better lives for their families. LSND is committed to using these findings to stand alongside our community and partners in addressing these challenges and building a better North Dakota for all.



## EDUCATE:

Tell someone about the issues who didn't know about them before! Start a discussion within your community and talk to local leaders about the need for civil legal aid.



## VOLUNTEER:

If you are an attorney, there is someone in North Dakota who needs your help. No matter what area of practice you are in, someone needs what you can do for them.



## DONATE:

LSND depends on grants and donations to provide their services to the vulnerable populations of North Dakota. Prioritize those in your community who cannot afford a lawyer, support LSND today!

