

FROM FORMAL COVERAGE TO SUBSTANTIVE ACCESSIBILITY: INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR EQUALIZING BASIC PUBLIC LEGAL SERVICES AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

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Abstract: As physical public legal service platforms and hotline and online channels have gradually been established at the county, township, village, and community levels, the principal task of equalizing county-level basic public legal services has shifted from filling gaps in institutional coverage to improving convenience, professionalism, and effectiveness. Equalization does not mean mechanically distributing institutions, personnel, and funding equally, nor does it require identical outcomes in different cases. Rather, it requires people in different areas and social groups to obtain legal services that meet basic quality standards, produce effective handling, and remain accessible at an affordable cost. At present, county-level public legal services still face several problems: resource allocation prioritizes platform coverage; professional provision is unstable; standardized provision is misaligned with differentiated needs; and performance assessment values quantity over effect. Countywide coordination should therefore underpin lists of services and responsibilities, needs-weighted fiscal funding, and mechanisms for government-purchased services. Quality evaluation should balance process and outcomes, while stronger safeguards should be provided for remote areas and special groups, thereby moving basic public legal services from formal coverage to substantive accessibility.

Keywords: County governance; Basic public legal services; Service equalization; Substantive accessibility; Institutional safeguards

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Public Legal Service System, which called for a modern public legal service system covering urban and rural areas and characterized by convenience, efficiency, equity, and inclusiveness. The National Plan for the Development of the Public Legal Service System (2021-2025) further arranged the development of physical platforms at the county, township, village, and community levels, as well as hotline and online platforms [1-2]. As the grassroots service network has taken shape, the focus of public legal service development has shifted from expanding institutional coverage to improving service quality and substantive accessibility. The creation of a platform does not by itself mean that members of the public can obtain professional assistance in a stable and convenient manner. In practice, premises may exist without regular services, channels may be available without effective coordination, and consultations may be recorded without adequate follow-up. Accordingly, evaluating equalization solely by the number of institutions, coverage rates, and duty-service counts risks treating formal network coverage as the actual realization of citizens' rights.

Existing scholarship has examined public legal services and their equalization from several perspectives. Ma Yingjuan and Cao Jifeng have clarified the conceptual boundaries of public services and public legal services; Liu Bingjun and Jiang Yinhua have focused on government responsibility and the transformation of governmental roles in the public legal service system; and Chen Rongzhuo and Tang Ming have explained the basis of governmental guarantees for basic rural legal services through their public-good character [3-7]. Xiang Jiquan, Tang Xuebing, and others have studied the equalization of basic public services, county-level supply capacity, and urban-rural spatial disparities [8-11], while Guo Minghong, Fang Shirong, and others have further examined system operation, government purchasing, modes of provision, rural practice, and the application of information technology [12-17]. These studies provide an important foundation, but there remains room for an integrated analysis of the transportation, time, information, and digital-use costs borne by the public after platforms have been put in place, as well as professional support, closed-loop referrals, and outcome evaluation across county, township, village, and community levels. Because a county combines an urban-rural structure with a resource-coordination function, it is an appropriate institutional unit for examining substantive access to basic public legal services.

For purposes of this article, county-level basic public legal services are foundational, inclusive legal services for which the government bears a minimum guaranteeing responsibility and which it provides directly or organizes social actors to provide. They mainly include basic legal consultation; applications for and guidance on legal aid; people's mediation; and basic guidance and referral concerning notarization, arbitration, and related matters. Market-based representation beyond the scope of the basic guarantee is excluded [5-6,18-19]. This article argues that the core of equalizing county-level basic public legal services is to enable different areas and groups to obtain services at an affordable cost, with

basic quality and effective handling. It therefore defines substantive accessibility through four dimensions - availability of opportunity, affordability of cost, a minimum quality floor, and effective disposition - then analyzes barriers in resource allocation, professional provision, responsiveness to demand, and performance evaluation, before proposing corresponding institutional safeguards.

2 THE MEANING OF SUBSTANTIVE ACCESSIBILITY IN THE EQUALIZATION OF COUNTY-LEVEL BASIC PUBLIC LEGAL SERVICES

2.1 The Scope of County-Level Basic Public Legal Services and the Government's Responsibility to Guarantee Them

A county is both a key receiving unit through which public services reach grassroots society and a crucial space linking professional legal resources in the county seat with legal needs in rural areas. Law firms, notarial offices, and legal aid institutions are generally concentrated in the county seat, whereas townships and villages generate large volumes of demand involving labor disputes, marriage and family matters, land contracting, neighborhood disputes, and social security. County public legal service centers can coordinate professionals, handle difficult matters, and supervise quality; township service stations are suited to routine reception, preliminary consultation, assistance with applications, and referrals; and village/community contact points should mainly identify demand, provide information, and arrange appointments. A county should therefore be understood not merely as a geographic area but also as the basic unit for budgeting, resource allocation, platform coordination, and quality evaluation. Basic public legal services are both public-interest and professional in nature. They cannot be left entirely to the market, but neither must administrative agencies provide everything directly. A more appropriate structure is one in which government assumes responsibility for the minimum guarantee, organization, coordination, and supervision; lawyers, notarial institutions, grassroots legal service workers, and social organizations provide specific services; and market mechanisms meet individualized needs beyond the basic scope [3-7].

2.2 The Goal of Equalization Is Minimum Fairness, Not Equal Allocation of Resources

The equalization of county-level basic public legal services is a form of relative equality centered on the protection of basic rights, rather than absolute equality in institutions, personnel, funding, and number of services. Requiring every township to maintain facilities of the same size and the same number of personnel could leave resources idle in low-demand areas while failing to offset higher service costs in remote areas. The core is to establish a universally applicable floor of basic services so that members of the public do not bear manifestly unreasonable disparities in opportunity and cost because of residence, economic status, age, disability, or digital ability. Relevant studies show that equalization of basic public services requires not only formal universal entitlement but also equal enjoyment in practice, while county-level provision is jointly shaped by fiscal capacity, population distribution, and spatial conditions [8-11]. Equalization of legal services therefore cannot mean identical substantive outcomes in different cases. It should instead mean broadly comparable service opportunities, minimum professional quality, and procedural safeguards. The county seat may provide fixed service windows, whereas remote townships may rely on circuit services, appointments, and remote support. Preferential allocation for disadvantaged groups is precisely what is needed to offset differences in practical ability to obtain services and to secure minimum fairness.

2.3 Criteria for the Shift from Formal Coverage to Substantive Accessibility

Whether county-level basic public legal services achieve substantive accessibility can be assessed across four interrelated dimensions. First is availability of opportunity: members of the public must be able to learn about channels, contact personnel, and receive a response within a reasonable period; platforms must not only exist but genuinely operate. Second is affordability of cost: explicit and implicit costs, including transportation, time, information, documentation, and digital operation, must remain reasonable; nominally free services are not necessarily inexpensive in practice. Third is a minimum quality floor: providers must possess appropriate competence; advice must be lawful, accurate, and complete; and procedural requirements concerning notice, confidentiality, and personal-information protection must be observed. Fourth is effective disposition: service cannot end with a single reception or simple registration, but should, depending on the matter, produce an answer, application assistance, professional handling, or an effective referral, with necessary feedback in complex cases. Scholarship on public legal services has already recognized the importance of operational effectiveness, technology use, and responsiveness to demand [12,16-17], but only by integrating these factors into accessibility criteria can a single coverage rate be prevented from concealing operational disparities. Institutional coverage is merely an input indicator; the core measure of equalization is whether people can obtain services of basic quality, at reasonable cost, that lead to effective handling.

3 INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO SUBSTANTIVE ACCESS TO COUNTY-LEVEL BASIC PUBLIC LEGAL SERVICES

3.1 Resource Allocation Prioritizes Institutional Coverage, Producing Uneven Service Capacity Within Counties

The expansion of the public legal service network has laid a foundation for grassroots access to legal assistance, but institutional presence does not automatically correspond to service capacity. Research on county-level public services and urban-rural equalization shows that grassroots supply capacity is affected by local fiscal resources, population distribution, service radius, and the concentration of professional resources; a spatially balanced network of outlets cannot by itself eliminate disparities in capacity [9-11]. Studies of rural public legal services likewise identify shortages of professionals, inadequate material support, and uneven regional distribution [15]. Within counties, lawyers, notaries, and similar resources tend to cluster in the county seat, while platforms in remote townships depend more heavily on staff of local justice offices, grassroots legal service workers, or part-time personnel. Such platforms can provide information and general consultation but often cannot promptly handle highly professional matters requiring sustained follow-up. Existing allocation methods also tend to rely on the number of platforms, permanent population, and service volume, while giving insufficient weight to county area, travel distance, migrant populations, disadvantaged groups, and the complexity of disputes. The result is spatial coverage without a corresponding downward movement of professional capacity: township and village/community platforms become registration and referral nodes, while members of the public must still make repeated trips to the county seat or wait for professionals to travel downward [2].

3.2 Short-Term Professional Service Provision Weakens the Operational Capacity of Grassroots Platforms

Effective operation of grassroots platforms depends on stable professionals and clear handling mechanisms. In practice, however, lawyer duty schemes, rotations, and government-purchased services are often project-based and short-term, resulting in brief contract cycles, frequent staff turnover, limited duty hours, and a lack of continuing responsibility for complex matters. Public legal services are not ordinary labor procurement: providers often must understand the facts, review materials, formulate advice, and make necessary referrals. If a contract specifies only hours on duty and the number of consultations, without response times, professional standards, referral responsibilities, and follow-up obligations, a one-off on-site answer may count as full performance even though the person's problem never enters substantive processing. Studies of system operation, government purchasing, and modes of provision consistently argue for stable relationships among governmental responsibility, the scope of purchase, service contractors, payment, and performance supervision, and warn against substituting temporary projects for continuing basic guarantees [12-14]. Research on rural practice further shows that transportation and personnel costs are higher in remote areas and that low-price, short-term procurement cannot sustain a stable professional team [15]. If the three tiers of platforms also lack fixed professional-support and referral relationships, simple matters receive answers while complex matters are passed upward repeatedly, and initial consultations are accepted without anyone taking responsibility for follow-up [20].

3.3 Standardized Provision Responds Inadequately to Differentiated Public Needs

Basic public legal services require a common floor, but neither service items nor modes of delivery can be mechanically uniform and detached from actual demand. County service programs are often shaped by annual tasks and budget structures. Public legal education, centralized consultation events, and fixed duty schedules are relatively easy to organize and quantify, whereas follow-up in complex disputes, home visits, and cross-department referrals require greater inputs and longer timeframes and are therefore more readily weakened. Research on rural public legal services has shown that regions differ in economic conditions, demographic structure, and rule-of-law resources, and that uniform provision cannot fully respond to diverse needs [15-17]. Access capacities also differ significantly among groups. Older persons may be unfamiliar with online platforms; persons with disabilities may require accessible facilities and communication support; migrant workers face constraints arising from working hours and mobility across jurisdictions; and micro- and small-business operators need more immediate guidance on contracts, employment, and related matters. Information technology can lower the cost of information searches and simple consultation, but it can also create new barriers through disparities in devices, connectivity, literacy, and operational skills. When technology platforms are not connected to offline staff, professional handling, and referral processes, users may also have to repeat their accounts and resubmit documents [16]. Although the institutional framework for integrating the three platforms calls for business coordination and data sharing [21], only a combination of technological connectivity, demand surveys, program adjustment, and human assistance can prevent digitalization from converting differences in ability into new inequalities of opportunity.

3.4 Quantitative Performance Assessment Fails to Constrain Service Quality and Effective Handling

Performance assessment directly shapes resource allocation and provider behavior. When the principal indicators are the number of platforms, activities, duty hours, people received, and publicity materials distributed, providers are more likely to choose programs that are easy to count and quickly produce data, while devoting insufficient resources to matters with long handling periods and high professional demands. Quantitative indicators can reflect coverage and workload, but they cannot show whether advice is accurate, whether users understand the next steps, whether referrals are completed, or whether problems are actually handled. Research on public legal service systems has argued that expansion of supply must be accompanied by attention to operational effectiveness and substantive responsiveness to public demand; government-purchased services likewise cannot replace professional quality control with simple counts and low prices [12-13,17]. Excessive reliance on immediate satisfaction also creates bias. A professional opinion may receive a low rating because it does not meet a party's expectations even though it is lawful and accurate; conversely,

accommodating advice may raise short-term satisfaction while increasing the cost of later rights protection. Satisfaction should therefore be only a supplementary indicator, not a substitute for professional quality, procedural compliance, and handling outcomes. If the system requires proof only that "a service occurred" rather than whether it was standardized and effective, formalistic operation will be difficult to correct.

4 INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS FOR SUBSTANTIVE ACCESS TO COUNTY-LEVEL BASIC PUBLIC LEGAL SERVICES

4.1 Establish Lists of Basic Services and Tiered Responsibilities

To move county-level basic public legal services from formal coverage to substantive accessibility, a list-based system should first clarify the boundaries of governmental guarantees and the duties of platforms at each level. Drawing on the national Catalogue of Public Legal Service Items and taking account of local demographics, dispute types, and resource conditions, county governments may formulate a basic-service list that specifies eligible users, content, channels, response times, minimum standards, and procedures [18]. The list may distinguish guaranteed basic services, inclusive extended services, and market services. Government should ensure stable provision of basic items; inclusive items may be added dynamically in response to demand; and individualized representation and other services beyond the basic scope should mainly be left to the market. This classification accords with scholarship on the boundaries of public services and governmental responsibility while preventing either limitless expansion of state responsibility or the simple marketization of basic guarantees [3,6-7]. A corresponding three-tier responsibility list should define the duties of county, township, and village/community platforms. County centers should coordinate professional resources, handle difficult matters, connect legal aid, provide operational guidance, and supervise quality. Township stations should receive users, provide preliminary consultation and document guidance, assist applications, track referrals, and report outcomes. Village/community contact points should identify needs, provide information, assist with appointments, and identify disadvantaged groups, but should not make complex legal judgments beyond their competence. Both lists should be regularly evaluated and publicized, and should include complaint and remedy channels so that members of the public know where to apply, who is responsible, and how to seek redress when service is not provided [17].

4.2 Improve Needs-Weighted Fiscal Funding and Countywide Resource Coordination

Basic public legal services are long-term and safety-net in nature. Funding should therefore be incorporated into stable budgets, with higher-level fiscal transfers used to offset disparities in financial capacity among counties. The Legal Aid Law of the People's Republic of China already requires governments at or above the county level to guarantee legal aid funding and promote balanced development [19]. Basic consultation, platform operation, circuit services, and safeguards for disadvantaged groups likewise require funding mechanisms linked to the service list. Research on equalization and county-level public services shows that resource allocation cannot be based solely on population and the number of institutions; it must also consider local fiscal capacity, urban-rural spatial disparities, service radius, and actual demand [8-11]. A budget structure of "basic guarantee + demand adjustment + cost compensation + moderate performance incentive" can therefore be adopted, incorporating county area, transportation conditions, migrant population, disadvantaged groups, actual service volume, and case complexity, with particular compensation for the costs of circuit, home-based, and downward professional services in remote areas. County centers should also maintain a professional service pool covering lawyers, notaries, legal aid personnel, grassroots legal service workers, and mediators, and improve resource use through links between urban professionals and townships, regular circuit services, consultations on difficult matters, cross-township deployment, and remote support. Areas with shortages of personnel or large service radii should receive sustained, rather than temporary, fiscal and staffing preferences [15].

4.3 Establish a Stable and Professional Mechanism for Government Purchase of Services

Government purchase of services can bring law firms, grassroots legal service offices, and social organizations into county-level public legal service provision, but its purpose should be to introduce professional capacity rather than simply outsource the government's guaranteeing responsibility. Research on governmental roles and modes of provision shows that administrative agencies may shift from direct, comprehensive provision toward organization, guarantee, and regulation, but may not abandon ultimate responsibility for basic services [7,14]. Before purchasing services, governments should assess needs, identify consultation, duty, circuit, and other services suitable for social providers, and retain responsibility for organization and coordination, resource allocation, quality supervision, and remedies. Contractors should not be selected solely on price; professional capacity, staff stability, grassroots experience, quality control, and past performance should all be assessed. Contract terms for continuing services may be reasonably extended to reduce frequent staff changes. Contracts should specify service times, response deadlines, personnel qualifications, referral and follow-up duties, record management, and confidentiality, while fees should reflect professional labor, travel, downward service in remote areas, and the cost of tracking complex matters [13,20]. Payment may combine a base fee with quality-based performance compensation, but success in litigation, successful mediation, or satisfaction of a party's subjective demands should not serve as the principal standard. Providers that deliver stable, high-quality services over time should receive renewal and evaluation incentives; providers that fail to appear, provide

perfunctory service, offer manifestly erroneous opinions, or receive repeated substantiated complaints should be subject to rectification and exit mechanisms.

4.4 Develop a Service Quality Evaluation Mechanism Balancing Process and Outcomes

Quality evaluation of county-level public legal services should move from quantity-based assessment to a balance of process and outcomes, with indicators tailored to different service types. Process evaluation should examine whether responses are timely, matters are handled by appropriate personnel, notice and confidentiality duties are fulfilled, cases are classified accurately, and referrals are made promptly. Outcome evaluation should not depend on whether a case is won or lost, but on whether users receive clear, lawful, and actionable advice; applications enter the appropriate procedures; referrals are accepted; complex matters receive follow-up; and repeated consultations and ineffective travel are reduced. Research on the effective operation and modern governance of public legal services emphasizes that the scale of provision must be combined with quality control, responsiveness to demand, and traceable responsibility [12,17]. General legal consultation should be evaluated for its legal basis, accuracy, intelligibility, and risk warnings; assistance with legal aid applications for document guidance and connection to acceptance procedures; people's mediation for voluntariness, legality, and performance; and guidance on notarization and arbitration for whether institutions, required materials, and remedy channels are clearly explained. To prevent a matter from being closed after a single reception, a closed loop of "registration - classification - handling or referral - feedback - confirmation - evaluation" may be established. Evaluators should also include supervisory spot checks, peer review, user feedback, third-party assessment, and complaint handling. Results should be linked appropriately to budgets, renewals, exits, and incentives, while an appeal and review mechanism should be available [13].

4.5 Strengthen Safety-Net Services for Remote Areas and Special Groups

Substantive accessibility also requires safety-net guarantees for remote areas and special groups. County governments may assess accessibility in each township according to population distribution, travel distance, service demand, and network conditions. In areas with inconvenient transportation, weak professional services, or a relatively large older population, the cost of access can be reduced through regular circuits, centralized appointments, mobile services, designated contacts, and home visits where necessary; frequency should reflect demand and service radius rather than being mechanically uniform. The staffing, funding, and geographic constraints identified in research on rural public legal services show that formally identical delivery models do not necessarily produce the same accessibility [15,17]. Older persons, persons with disabilities, migrant workers, minors, and other groups should be offered human consultation, accessible facilities, plain-language guidance, staggered-hour appointments, cross-jurisdiction referrals, and home services where necessary. Digital platforms should mainly support information searches, simple consultations, appointments, preliminary document review, and progress inquiries; complex matters should be transferred promptly to hotlines, service windows, or in-person assistance. Physical, hotline, and online platforms should share basic information and documents more effectively to reduce repeated explanations and submissions [16,21]. Human entry points must nonetheless be preserved, allowing assistance by family members, handling by staff, or telephone appointments, so that technical rules do not become new eligibility barriers. Only by combining digital services with offline safety nets can substantive equality be advanced through geographic compensation, capacity support, and technological assistance.

5 CONCLUSION

The establishment of county-level public legal service networks has laid the foundation for basic public legal services to shift from expansion in scale to improvement in quality. Equalization can no longer be measured primarily by the number of institutions, coverage rates, and service volume; it must ask whether different areas and groups can obtain stable and professional services, at an affordable cost, that lead to effective handling. The current gap between formal coverage and substantive accessibility stems chiefly from mismatches between platform networks and professional capacity, project-based provision and continuing demand, uniform service modes and differentiated capacities to obtain services, and quantitative assessment and actual effects. Counties should therefore serve as the units for responsibility and resource coordination. Service and responsibility lists should define the boundaries of guarantees; needs-weighted funding and stable government-purchased services should move professional resources downward; process-and-outcome evaluation should create closed-loop handling; and offline safety nets and human assistance should prevent geographic, ability, and digital differences from becoming new service barriers. The shift from formal coverage to substantive accessibility is, in essence, a shift in public legal services from an infrastructure-oriented logic to a rights-realization-oriented logic.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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