



Administrative Office of the Courts

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Aug. 4, 2026

Supreme Court approves skills-based pathway to becoming a licensed lawyer in New Mexico

SANTA FE – The New Mexico Supreme Court today announced a new way for law school graduates to become licensed to practice law in the state by working under the supervision of a lawyer and submitting a portfolio to demonstrate their legal skills. The Court acted pursuant to its exclusive authority to license lawyers in New Mexico.

“The skills-based pathway to licensure ensures that new attorneys possess the practical, on-the-job lawyering skills needed to help New Mexicans,” said Chief Justice Julie J. Vargas. “This new option for admission to the practice of law also has the potential to increase the number of attorneys in New Mexico to address unmet legal needs, particularly in rural areas where it is difficult to find a lawyer.”

Two-thirds of New Mexico’s 33 counties have fewer than one lawyer for each 1,000 residents, which makes them a “legal desert” under the American Bar Association’s definition.

The new approach to licensure offers an alternative to the traditional route followed by law school graduates in taking the state’s bar examination, which is a two-day standardized test to assess whether an individual is competent in the law.

The [Court issued an order](#) last week establishing a process, in conjunction with the State Board of Bar Examiners (BBE), to develop necessary rules, forms, rubrics, and training guides to implement the skills-based pathway. The Court will issue a further order setting a start date for the new licensure option, but expects the BBE will begin accepting applications by the middle of 2027.

A Supreme Court-appointed committee made up of lawyers, judges, and law professors recommended the skills-based pathway after studying attorney licensure issues for more than a year. The [committee’s report to the Court](#) found the current exam-based licensure system does not accurately assess all the skills necessary to practice law, such as communicating with clients, writing legal documents, and advocating before a judge. Additionally, the written bar exam acts as an artificial barrier for some qualified attorney candidates, who may struggle with the test format, be unable to afford a bar exam prep course to improve chances of a passing score, or must work as they study and prepare for the exam.

The BBE will implement and manage the skills-based program, including assessing a participant's portfolio. The Board currently administers the bar exam twice a year and processes applications for admission to the practice of law. The bar exam will continue to be an option for law school graduates seeking licensure in New Mexico.

How the skills-based pathway will work

To participate, applicants must meet basic requirements and identify a supervising attorney or host organization, such as a law firm, governmental organization, or civil legal aid provider. Qualified applicants will receive a provisional license to perform legal work, which will be used for their portfolio. The core requirements for participants include having a law degree, completing a character and fitness assessment, and passing a test on the ethical responsibilities of attorneys. The same basic requirements apply to any person seeking a law license in the state.

Participants must:

- Complete at least 675 hours of legal work within a 12-month period under the supervision of a qualified attorney or host organization. A six-month extension is possible under exceptional circumstances.
- Submit a portfolio of their work to demonstrate competencies in specified areas: written legal products, such as briefs and pleadings drafted by the applicant; client meetings; advocacy before a judge or hearing officer; negotiations; investigations in representing a client; interactions with other legal professionals, such as opposing counsel and judges; and law practice management. The supervising attorney certifies and attests to the applicant's work, and the BBE evaluates the portfolio.

“New Mexicans will benefit from these reforms to the legal profession,” said Justice C. Shannon Bacon, a member of the Court's study committee and vice chair of a [national group that issued a report](#) last year on improving legal education and licensure. “Skills-based licensure will enhance the readiness of new attorneys to practice law and expand access to our justice system for people with legal issues, whether it is custody of children, housing problems, or consumer debt.”

New Mexico joins about a half dozen other states that have adopted licensure alternatives to the bar exam. At least seven other states are exploring possible attorney licensure changes. New Mexico's skills-based pathway is similar to a post-graduation supervised practice program launched in Oregon in 2024.

###



Julie J. Vargas
Chief Justice
New Mexico Supreme Court



C. Shannon Bacon
Justice
New Mexico Supreme Court