

SECTION IV

Careers in Public Interest Law

CAREERS IN PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

Introduction

Public interest lawyers represent people, causes, and issues that are otherwise under- represented in the courts, legislative bodies, and administrative agencies. The American Bar Association defines public interest law as that which “encompasses a wide range of law-related activities which aim toward bettering our society. . .” Through their work, public interest attorneys help balance the scales of justice, provide equal access to the justice system, and promote social change.

Most public interest lawyers work in public interest litigation organizations, public defender programs, and legal services offices, and non-profit organizations. Some of these organizations represent individual clients, while others represent particular interest groups or political agendas. While some public service organizations focus on litigation, others emphasize policy research, advocacy, and lobbying or community education. The work done by public interest lawyers covers a broad spectrum of substantive legal areas. For example, public service practice areas include:

AIDS/HIV	Criminal	Environmental	Homelessness
Animal Rights	Disability	Family	Immigration
Children	Education	LGBTQ+ Rights	International Human Rights
Civil Rights	Elder	Health	Welfare
Consumer	Employment	Housing	Women’s Law

Recruitment

Unlike many private law firms, most public interest employers lack the resources to conduct formal campus recruiting and, therefore, generally hire attorneys as positions and funding become available. However, some of the larger employers recruit on and off campus during the fall and spring for summer and permanent positions. While other public interest organizations generally do not participate in campus recruitment, many provide summer internship opportunities with application deadlines ranging from fall to early spring. Please also be aware that for many public interest agencies, the selection process may take some time. Candidates should be prepared to stay in communication with employers throughout the process in order to convey continuing interest in the position. While many exceptional summer public interest employment opportunities exist, students must take an active and creative role in seeking them out.

As with any career search, you should begin by doing some self-assessment. This involves identifying your interests, skills, strengths, values, and needs. Please refer to the Self=Assessment section for more information. Particularly with public interest work, you should develop a focus or vision of the specific kind of work you wish to pursue (i.e. juvenile advocacy).

In addition to those qualities legal employers generally seek in candidates (solid legal skills, ability to assume responsibility quickly and work independently, and a good “personality fit”), **prior public interest experience and a demonstrated commitment to public interest work in general and in a particular practice area are extremely important to public interest employers.**

Gaining Experience

There are many ways to gain public interest experience while in law school. Consider the following:

Internships/Pro Bono

Internships can be paid, volunteer, or work-study. Creative funding opportunities exist through grants, fellowships, and stipends. The Career Development Office is subscribed to psjd.org, a public interest job board and clearinghouse for relevant public interest information. In addition, you may participate in the Public Interest/Public Service (PIPS) Job Fair held in January/February. The Career Development Office has public interest job opportunities advertised in Symplicity.

Lastly, our Public Interest Resource Center (PIRC) can assist in matching students with pro bono opportunities with public interest agencies for pro bono credit.

Externships

Off-campus work with non-profit organizations or government agencies for academic credit during the summer or the school year.

Clinics

Students work directly with indigent clients under supervision and training clinical faculty.

Research Assistants

Students can also gain experience by working as a research assistant for a professor, through independent research and writing projects and competitions, course selection, and leadership in student organizations and community activities.

Networking/Informational Interviewing Opportunities

Networking and informational interviewing are critical to achieving career goals. Fortunately, in the public interest arena, opportunities for networking abound. Consider the following:

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS is a coalition of law student organizations that offers grants and other forms of assistance to students and recent graduates engaged in public interest employment. Equal Justice Works serves as a clearinghouse and public education and training center and works with its member organizations to create public interest legal employment and training opportunities. Equal Justice Works is actively involved in public interest fundraising activities and in providing information on loan repayment assistance programs.

THE EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS ANNUAL PUBLIC INTEREST LAW CAREER FAIR usually takes place in October. Panels and workshops are also scheduled, as well as a Conference that is the largest annual gathering of law students and public interest leaders. Refer to the Job Fairs section for additional information. This job fair presents an outstanding opportunity to obtain summer or full-time public interest employment.

Fellowships and Funding Opportunities

Funding opportunities are available through honors programs in federal and state government agencies, through academic, public interest, and entrepreneurial fellowships, and through foundation grants. Fellowships are usually one- or two-year post-graduate positions of two types: (1) those that fund the fellow's salary at a public interest organization (such as Community Legal Aid); and (2) those that fund the creation of a new project.

While fellowship and grant deadlines vary, many are in the early fall of the applicant's final year of law school. You should begin funding searches early since applications require significant effort and are competitive. A fellowship application typically requires a project proposal and often requires the applicant to secure a sponsoring organization. Because sponsoring organizations are very interested in obtaining fellowship funding, many are more than willing to help you prepare your project proposal and application materials. You may wish to begin your application preparation by obtaining a copy of an old application.

Some Popular Fellowships:

THE HONORABLE PHYLLIS W. BECK PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FELLOWSHIP

This program supports public interest legal services by funding the compensation of lawyers who desire to practice public interest law with organizations in the Greater Philadelphia area and the surrounding counties. This fellowship program is sponsored by the Independence Foundation, which was established in 1996 to address the need for legal assistance to the disadvantaged, including the elderly, disabled, homeless, and those deprived of civil or human rights. The Foundation awards four fellowships for one-year terms with an option to renew for a second year. Recent Fellows have created projects to work with organizations such as the Legal Clinic for the Disabled, Nationalities Service Center, Community Legal Services, ACLU of Pennsylvania. The application deadline is usually in the early fall. For more information, see <https://independencefoundation.org/>

EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS FELLOWSHIPS.

Equal Justice Works is the nation's largest postgraduate legal public service fellowship program supporting advocacy projects on behalf of individuals, groups, or interests that are not adequately represented by our legal

system. The emphasis of this two-year program is on projects designed to implement innovative legal advocacy for underserved populations, or that create lasting institutions. Advocacy may cover a broad range of activities including community legal education and training, organizing, direct services, litigation, transactional work, and administrative or legislative efforts. Weight is given to projects that serve geographic areas that experience difficulties attracting public interest attorneys. The salary equals the starting salary of the sponsoring organization plus educational debt assistance. The application deadline is usually in mid-September. For more information, see www.equaljusticeworks.org

SKADDEN PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIP.

This program awards annual fellowships to graduating law students and outgoing judicial clerks to work in a wide range of sponsoring public interest organizations providing civil legal services to the poor. Fellows receive a salary plus benefits and debt service on law school loans for the duration of the Fellowship. Fellowships are awarded for one year with the expectation of renewal for a second year. For more information, check out the website at www.skaddenfellowships.org.

PSJD.org contains a comprehensive list of fellowships and deadlines as well as a job bank and listing of summer funding sources for internships. www.psjd.org

