

Public Interest Law

Public interest law is a diverse, challenging, inspiring and rigorous practice. The work of public interest lawyers includes a broad spectrum of responsibilities and clients. To answer the question, "what is public interest law?", we can start by examining the many practice settings where public interest lawyers work. For the purposes of this handout, public interest is defined separately from government work.

PUBLIC INTEREST SETTINGS

Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations were formed to promote the public interest (as opposed to special interests) in areas such as consumer protection, environment, civil rights, and government accountability. A nonprofit organization usually operates under a defined mission and centers its efforts around this objective. They often hire lawyers for such positions as general counsel, lobbyists and legislative directors, community outreach directors, grant writers, and policy advisors. Activities can include litigating; drafting legislation, agency rules, and regulations to accomplish policy goals; lobbying and monitoring the legislature; building political coalitions; researching and publishing reports; and educating the public.

Policy Oriented Legal Organizations

Policy oriented organizations specialize in large scale strategies to protect legal rights or bring about social changes in a particular area. Advocacy methods include class action litigation, lobbying for legislation, and educating the community on their specialty area. Each organization generally focuses on specific areas of public policy and legal reform issues. Activities can include organizing, researching, developing policy, acting as a watchdog agency, and writing amicus court briefs.

Direct Service Organizations

Direct service organizations seek to represent those people or groups of people who could not otherwise afford legal counsel. The areas of law most commonly practiced are civil matters including housing, family law, government benefits, debtor-creditor, and immigration law.

Some Legal Services Programs receive funding from a variety of sources and serve only low-income clients. A large number of programs are funded by the Legal Service Corporation and are subject to prohibitions on class actions, challenges to welfare reform, collection of attorneys' fees, rulemaking, lobbying, litigation on behalf of prisoners, representation in drug-related public housing evictions, and representation of certain categories of aliens. Those offices not receiving LSC funding can concentrate on larger systemic legal problems of the poor and are not restricted to representing indigent clients in purely civil matters. Legal service attorneys get extensive trial work and may also be responsible for community education and legislative lobbying.

Public Interest Law Firms

Private Public Interest Law Firms are generally small private practice law firms that concentrate on representing individuals, labor unions, or nonprofit organizations on issues such as employment discrimination, civil rights, housing and environmental law. Their clients can range from criminal defendants, citizen groups, or plaintiffs in tort claims, such as injured persons from defective products. Another type of practice involves the growing field of community economic development.

International Public Interest Law

International Public Interest Law is a growing field of interest. The largest number of lawyers are either working for international organizations, such as the United Nations, or human rights organizations in the United States or abroad, such as Amnesty International. The focus of such work can range from criminal defense to analysis of new comprehensive treaties on civil and political rights. Opportunities for full-time employment remain few. Students are advised to gain some international experience as well as fluency in at least one foreign language.

Public Interest Opportunities in Criminal Defense

Public and appellate defenders are responsible for providing legal services in criminal matters to people who could not otherwise afford representation by a lawyer. Public defenders accept cases referred to their offices by the courts. Public defenders primarily focus upon pretrial and trial activities whereas appellate defenders are involved in the criminal appeals process. Usually new lawyers will quickly gain experience.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST JOB SEARCH

The timing and hiring process for public interest positions can be as varied as the many types of organizations. Unlike large law firms, most public interest organizations cannot make permanent job offers a year in advance of employment. Most public interest employers make offers much closer to the actual employment date such as in the late Spring or Summer. There are some important exceptions to this rule, such as post-graduate fellowship opportunities which have early Fall deadlines. (See the fellowship deadline handout and other resources in the Office of Career Services for more information on fellowships.) For Summer internship positions, the process can begin early in the Fall for select opportunities and continues well into the Spring.

Many public interest organizations participate in the **Midwest Public Interest Career Conference** held each year in Chicago for law students from the schools of the Chicago Area Law School Consortium. (The Conference is usually held in February.)

Equal Justice Works sponsors a national public interest job fair each year in Washington, D.C. usually during the last week in October. Hundreds of employers participate, primarily offering summer internships. The Office of Career Services will announce registration information once it is available.

Throughout the year, many public interest employers will contact the Office of Career Services regarding both summer internships and permanent placements. Such job posting are all listed on the Job Bank at www.eattorney.com.

Researching Opportunities and Targeting Employers

There are numerous resources available in the Office of Career Services (in both the Public Service Center and the Book Room). In addition, there are many helpful on-line resources to investigate in a public interest job search. These are too numerous to list, but a few highlights are:

- www.equaljusticeworks.org – information about Equal Justice Works with excellent links to a wide variety of public interest information
- www.internships-usa.com – a wide range of internship opportunities, log in and password information is available from the Office of Career Services
- www.pirg.org/jobs – opportunities with the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG) and PIRG-related organizations
- www.idealists.org – jobs in the nonprofit sector
- www.nlada.org – website for The National Legal Aid and Defender Association, includes a directory of all offices and a listing of job opportunities

Students must take an active role in identifying potential employers and often must initiate the contact with the employer, particularly for permanent placements.

An essential step in the public interest job search is developing a list of potential employers in which the student is interested. One of the most effective tools for developing this list, as well as identifying job opportunities, is the **networking and informational interviewing** process.

Networking is the process of contacting the people you know and/or have a connection with to help gather information and develop employment contacts. Your network can consist of present and former employers and colleagues, alumni of the College of Law, and professors. Rather than advertising openings, employers often prefer to hire someone who has worked for them during the summer or as part of a clinical program or who was referred by a colleague.

Prior **experience and commitment** to public interest work is one of the most important qualifications for the job search. Commitment can be demonstrated in many ways: summer internships, clinical courses, term-time volunteer work, public interest legal publications, and active roles in public interest related student groups.

FINANCING A PUBLIC INTEREST CAREER

There are a variety of funding programs for law students who wish to work in the public interest/public sector during the summer. There are also scholarship and loan assistance programs to make it more financially possible to enter public interest law. See the Public Service Center and the Book Room for comprehensive information about summer funding, scholarship, and loan assistance programs.

Several national funding sources are also available to law students for summer public interest work. Examples of the more popular funding sources include the Equal Justice America stipends and the Equal Justice Works Summer Corps.

SUMMER PUBLIC INTEREST POSITIONS

The following is a selection of public interest organizations that have recently employed University of Illinois College of Law students after their first and second years of law school. It is not intended to be a comprehensive listing of public interest opportunities and, as indicated above, does not include government opportunities.

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
American Civil Liberties Union Foundation
Atlanta Legal Aid Society
Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic
Center for Conflict Resolution
Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice
Chicago Legal Clinic
Children's Rights Council
Citizen Advocacy Center
Cook County Public Guardian
Disability Law Center (Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis)
Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault
Illinois Migrant Legal Assistance Foundation
International Justice Mission
Kane County Child Advocacy Center
Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation
Lawyers for the Creative Arts
Legal Assistance Foundation of Chicago
Legal Foundation of Washington
Legal Services Program of Northern Indiana
Massachusetts Labor Relations Commission
Maurice and Sane Sugar Law Center
Mexican Legal Studies Program
Michigan Legal Services
Midwest Center for Justice
Midwest Immigration and Human Rights Center
Montana Legal Services Association
NAACP
National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium
Philadelphia Volunteers for the Indigent Project
Prairie State Legal Services
Pro Bono Advocate
South African Human Rights Commission
The Rutherford Institute
Woman's Fund

For further information or assistance in any of these matters, please make an appointment to meet with one of the counselors in the Office of Career Services.