

# FINDING AND GETTING A JOB

## THE VARIABLE TIME LINE

Public interest organizations are not uniform. They vary in type, purpose, structure, and funding sources. Therefore, one time line model does not exist for applying to all public interest jobs. The appropriate time line will depend on the type of organization you are applying to. Even relying on an employer's previous hiring schedule is not a perfect measure of the process for this year. Many organizations cannot predict their hiring needs or funding far in advance. Even though no perfect time line exists, some overriding, general guidelines do apply:

## THE FIRST YEAR CALENDAR

### BEFORE NOVEMBER 1

Although academic course work should be a student's primary focus, it is possible to begin preparing oneself for public interest employment even before the November 1, NALP guideline.<sup>1</sup>

- ❑ Attend lectures and programs offered at the College of Law. Many organizations bring speakers and other programs to the College that pertain to public interest law. These activities can help you determine which areas of the public sector are most intriguing to you.
- ❑ Some student organizations provide students with opportunities to do service, such as PILF, Amicus, Environmental Law Society, ISBA Grade School Project, and Prisoner's Rights Research Project. Also, involvement in any student organization, even those not directly associated with public interest law, will put you in contact with other students, including 2Ls and 3Ls. These students are great contacts for job searches and networking.
- ❑ Attend the NAPIL Public Interest Career Fair in Washington, D.C. This program is held in Washington, D.C., usually in late October and hosts a public interest job fair including over 200 employers. Look for information from Career Services, PILF, and at [www.napil.org](http://www.napil.org). Although 1Ls cannot formally interview, they can participate in "table talk." Table talk allows students to meet informally with prospective employers and to give resumes to employers. The Conference also includes a variety of informational sessions, panels, and presentations.
- ❑ Participate in volunteer work as a way to demonstrate a commitment to public service. The volunteer opportunities do not need to be law related. For more information about potential volunteer positions, look for announcements in the College of Law or contact the University of Illinois Office of Volunteer Programs at 333-7424, [ovp@uiuc.edu](mailto:ovp@uiuc.edu), or [www.union.uiuc.edu/ovp/](http://www.union.uiuc.edu/ovp/).

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<sup>1</sup> National Association for Law Placement sets November 1 as the date upon which member law schools may begin offering placement services to 1L students.

## **AFTER NOVEMBER 1**

Now that the job search process has officially begun, it is time to become familiar with all Career Services has to offer.

- ❑ Take advantage of Career Service programs provided for 1Ls. Information about job search skills and the search process will be provided.
- ❑ Attend events sponsored by Career Services for Public Interest Week. These include noontime panel discussions on different areas of the public sector and are good ways to network and explore career options.
- ❑ Make an appointment with the Assistant Dean for Career Services, the Director of Career Counseling, or the Public Interest Coordinator to discuss long-term and short-term career planning and resume writing.
- ❑ Write and rewrite your resume and your cover letter.

## **OVER WINTER VACATION AND EARLY IN SPRING SEMESTER**

Once exams are finished and life has returned to normal, take advantage of the few weeks of vacation to relax and begin to prepare a job search strategy for summer public interest employment.

- ❑ Develop a strategy for summer employment by considering the type of employment, financial restrictions, and geographic location.
- ❑ Look through job postings of summer internship or externship opportunities.
- ❑ Make yourself available to meet with prospective employers. Meeting with public service practitioners is a great way to get information about the field and begin a successful job search.
- ❑ Apply for positions as early as possible. Even though some public interest employers may be slow to respond, it is always better to submit an application early than to miss the deadline.
- ❑ Watch for announcements regarding Spring On-Campus Interviewing and The Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference in Chicago, PILI internships, and PILF summer grants.

## **SUMMER**

Hopefully, you will be busy working at your summer job, internship, or externship. Take advantage of opportunities for continuing the job search process and look ahead to next year.

- ❑ Continue reading, researching, and networking. By the end of the summer, you should have a few job strategies and goals for the fall.

- ❑ Career counseling through Career Services is available throughout the summer.
- ❑ Consider finding an internship, externship, or volunteer opportunity for the academic year or semester.

## **SECOND & THIRD YEAR CALENDAR**

There is no perfect way to do a public interest job search. You will have to design a your own plan and agenda. Students in their second or third year of law school have greater flexibility to pursue their public service interests than first year students. The goals for these students are two fold. First, students should continue to construct opportunities that demonstrate their commitment to public interest law and public service. Second, these students need to commence the task of finding summer or permanent employment. There is really no specific schedule or method for finding a public interest job, but the following is a generic outline to help you structure your job search.

### **SUMMER**

- ❑ Hold law-related employment, even if it is not necessarily public interest. The skills and experience you gain from working in the legal profession will be transferable to other settings. Also, if you are not working in the public sector and time permits, consider holding a legal or non-legal volunteer position to continue to demonstrate your commitment to public interest.
- ❑ Review your course selection for next fall. Consider applying for a position in the College of Law Civil Law Clinic or an externship. Demonstrate your interest in pursuing public interest work through the classes that you take. Many interviewers will ask about your course work and which classes you particularly enjoy.
- ❑ Depending on your fall class schedule, you might have time to hold part-time employment during the semester. The summer provides an excellent opportunity to research positions with the State's Attorney, Public Defender, firms, or organizations in the Champaign-Urbana area for employment in the fall.
- ❑ If you are going to be a 3L and are interested in applying for a post-graduate Fellowship, Summer is the time to begin to prepare the applications, draft personal statements or essays and design projects if necessary.

### **FALL**

- ❑ Consider participating in the fall On Campus Interviews and attend Boot Camp. A few public interest and government employers will participate in the program or accept resumes through Resume Collection process. Also, you might find a firm that supports *pro bono* or public interest work through its for-profit activities. Remember, you can contribute to public interest from many settings. Being a summer associate at a law firm is an excellent credential for any type of future employment.

- ❑ Continue to develop and implement your job search plan. It is never too early to begin looking for summer public interest employment. Make sure that you have updated your resume after last summer's employment.
- ❑ Make a counseling appointment with Career Services for assistance with search strategies.
- ❑ Attend the Equal Justice Works Career Fair. This program is held in Washington, D.C., usually in late October, and hosts a public interest job fair including over 200 employers. The Conference also includes a variety of informational sessions, panels, and presentations. Look for information from Career Services, PILF, and at [www.napil.org](http://www.napil.org).
- ❑ Create a list of potential employment opportunities. Information about organizations, agencies, and offices that host summer legal interns can be found in books located in Career Services and on many websites. Send out your resume and individualized cover letters to these organizations. If you will be available for an interview over winter or Thanksgiving break, make sure to include this information.
- ❑ If you are interested in working in Chicago, prepare your PILI grant application. The applications are usually made available in October and are due by early March. PILI also has opportunities for 3Ls looking for part-time public interest employment while studying for the bar. These positions go fast, so apply early!
- ❑ Don't miss opportunities! Regularly check the on-line Job Posting Board, read the Docket, and attend programs hosted by Career Services and student organizations. Information about special public interest employment opportunities and applications are often made available in the fall. You never know when there will be an open position or an opportunity for networking.

## **WINTER AND SPRING**

- ❑ Continue to follow up on the mailing that you sent out in the fall. If that attempt to find public interest employment was unsuccessful, begin searching for new opportunities and send out another mailing.
- ❑ Use winter break as an opportunity to conduct employment and informational interviews.
- ❑ Consider holding a volunteer or part-time employment position for the spring semester. (One possibility is the Public Interest Coordinator's position in Career Services.)
- ❑ Get involved with PILF's fund drive and other activities. Students with a demonstrated commitment to PILF are more likely to receive summer grants.

## **SUMMER**

- ❑ If you just completed your second year and think that you might be interested in a post-graduate fellowship, begin research as early as possible. There are hundreds of opportunities and many of the applications are due in the early fall. Some fellowships require that an applicant secure their own employment or project before even applying. This can take a considerable amount of preparation and legwork.

- ❑ As a rising 3L, begin to develop a job search plan to find post-graduate employment. Keep your resume updated.
- ❑ Network throughout the summer. Often, it is who you know that helps you get a permanent position in public interest law.

## **PREPARING RESUMES & COVER LETTERS**

Writing top-quality resumes and cover letters is one of the most important aspects of your job search. The University of Illinois College of Law Career Services Handbook provides excellent information about drafting resumes and cover letters. Please refer to this information when preparing your resume and cover letter.

Although the information contained in the general Career Services Handbook is helpful, there are some additional items that should be addressed by students seeking public interest employment.

### **THINK OF COVER LETTERS AS WRITING SAMPLES**

Traditionally, public interest employers have not required writing samples from applicants. However, it is becoming more common for government and public sector employers to request writing samples from applicants with the application or during the interview. Applications submitted to public interest employers should be as complete as possible. Regardless of the application procedure, you should always be prepared with all relevant material, including writing samples, when attending interviews.

When applying for a job, cover letters always serve as a writing sample. Thus, cover letters should be flawlessly written, presented, and demonstrative of your best work.

### **EXPLAIN YOUR INTEREST IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

Public interest employers want to hire students with a demonstrated commitment to public service or public interest law. Information, such as volunteer experiences, that would not normally be covered in a typical legal resume should be included in a resume geared for public interest employment. The same holds true for cover letters. Make sure that both cover letters and resumes are tailored to the specific organization or interest area for which you are applying. An employer should be able to skim the cover letter and resume and see your commitment to the public sector.

You will have to decide what other information demonstrates your commitment to the public sector. Some additional ideas include: past public interest employment, clinical experience, leadership in public interest student organizations, personal qualities, course work, journal research topics, and volunteer work.

## **ACT PROFESSIONAL**

Public interest employers expect the same level of professionalism from applicants as expected by private sector employers. When writing resumes and cover letters, ensure that your tone and quality is formal and professional. And proofread, proofread, proofread!

## **INTERVIEWING**

Many students preparing for interviews tend to face feelings of anxiety and apprehension. Although interviews can be scary, they are really just an opportunity to convince the employer that they should hire you and to find out if you want to work there. For a complete explanation on preparing for interviews and participating in an interview, see the University of Illinois College of Law Career Services Handbook. The Career Services Handbook provides many suggestions and useful hints about how to succeed during an interview for a legal position. These suggestions apply equally well for public and private sector employment. However, there are a few additional points that pertain specifically to public interest employment:

### **SCHEDULE INTERVIEWS**

Most public interest employers do not have the resources to interview students on campus or pay for applicants' travel expenses. Therefore, remember to take advantage of times that you will be in their geographic area. Many students find that winter vacation provides an excellent opportunity to schedule employment and informational interviews. Career Services also has the ability to arrange for video conference interviews, at a nominal change. This form of interview can be very effective at both the initial and final stages.

### **CONVEY YOUR PASSION FOR PUBLIC INTEREST**

Public interest employers want to make sure that you are capable of performing legal work as well as being committed to public service or the target issue/population. Before attending the interview, research the organization and any related current events. Find ways to convey your passion or commitment for the position and the work the employer does. This should not be difficult if you are sincerely interested in the work being accomplished by the organization or agency.

### **BE YOURSELF**

Many public interest organizations have small staffs and close working conditions. Through interviews, employers want to assess your ability to work as a team and to determine whether you will fit into the existing office and staff. Due to the importance of becoming part of the team, be careful to research the employer thoroughly before the interview. Having this information will assist you in discussing how your particular skills and experience could be valuable to the organization.

## **ANSWER SITUATIONAL QUESTIONS**

Students who have interviewed with public interest employers often find that interviewers ask pointed questions about the more personal material on resumes. Be prepared to talk about yourself, work experience, interests, and hobbies. Also, some public interest employers are notorious for asking hypothetical questions aimed at learning how applicants would solve a particular problem, make ethical judgments, or handle stress.

## **DRESS APPROPRIATELY**

Although some public interest employers do not require formal business attire in their office, never show up for an interview dressed casually. Remember that business attire is always appropriate, and sends a positive message about your professionalism and enthusiasm about the job.

# **PERSISTENCE AND NETWORKING**

## **THE HIDDEN JOB MARKET**

Developing relationships to gather information about the field is a way to access the “hidden job market.” Many students seeking public interest employment find jobs through a network of employers, friends, and professional contacts. As a result, the ability to network successfully is a crucial job search skill. A network of contacts can provide advice on a job search, information about the field, answers to questions about career choices, and names of other people to contact for more information.

The University of Illinois College of Law Career Services Handbook provides insight and guidance on how to build a network, identify potential contact, and hold successful informational interviews. Students who are willing to seek out employment opportunities, instead of just waiting to apply for posted jobs, will have to excel at the ability to network and establish personal relationships.

## **PERSISTENCE**

Public interest employers do not follow a uniform hiring procedure. The time between an interview and response will vary from organization to organization. Often employers will have to struggle through the bureaucracy to ensure that they have the resources to hire someone for an internship, externship, or a job. Depending on the employer and time of year, this process can take months. Don’t give up! If you are interested in a position, continue to follow up with an employer. Being persistent, but not annoying, demonstrates continued commitment and interest in the employer.

Also, navigating through the unstructured maze of public sector employment is difficult and uncertain. It is not unusual for students to find themselves frustrated and disillusioned. Remember, public interest positions do exist. At the points when your motivation declines, reenergize by researching in a new manner, making a counseling appointment with Career Services, or finding a supportive friend. These resources will help you stay true to your intentions of working in public interest law.