

SECTION IV

Careers in Public Interest Law

CAREERS IN PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

Introduction

Public interest lawyers represent people, causes and issues which 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 law firms (public interest litigation organizations, public defender programs and legal services offices), private law firms, non-profit organizations and government entities. 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	Gay 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 government 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. Opportunities are most abundant in Washington, D.C., New York and California; however, Philadelphia and Baltimore contribute their fair share. There is a wealth of information available in the Career Development Office with respect to specific internship opportunities.

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 Career Development section on skills assessment 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 participates in the Public Interest/Public Service Job Fair ([see Section on Job Fairs](#)). The Career Development Office also has public interest job opportunities advertised in Symplicity, its job bank. In addition, the campus had a pro bono office that offers opportunities for students to engage in work 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.

Clinicals. Students work directly with clients under the supervision and training of clinical program instructors.

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 fund raising activities and providing information on loan repayment assistance programs.

THE EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS ANNUAL PUBLIC INTEREST LAW CAREER FAIR usually takes in the early Fall and is held in the Washington, D.C. area. Over 100 employers conduct interviews or informational sessions. Panels and workshops are also scheduled, as well as a Conference which is the largest annual gathering of law students and public interest leaders. Refer to the Career Development section on Job Fairs 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; academic, public interest and entrepreneurial fellowships; and foundation grants. Fellowships are usually one to two year post-graduate positions of two types: (1) those that fund the fellow's salary at a public interest organization (i.e. 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 on the part of the applicant 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 early by obtaining a copy of an old application.

Some Popular Fellowships:

INDEPENDENCE FOUNDATION 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 Philadelphia and surrounding counties. The Foundation 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 a one year term with an option to renew for a second year. Recent Independence Foundation Fellows have created projects to work with organizations such as the AIDS Law Project of Philadelphia, Women Against Abuse Legal Center, Friends of Farmworkers and the Pennsylvania Health Law Project. The application deadline is usually in the early fall.

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

PHILADELPHIA BAR FOUNDATION PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIP Participants are provided the opportunity to defer their entry at participating law firms in order to spend one year at a Philadelphia public interest organization. During the fellowship year, and the subsequent year at the law firm, participants receive half of their law firm salary annually plus benefits. After one year at the law firm, compensation and benefits rise to the same level as the participant's class. Deadlines are usually in early January. The following firms have participated in the Philadelphia Bar Foundation Public Interest Fellowship:

Morgan Lewis & Bockius, LLP	Pepper Hamilton, LLP
Drinker, Biddle & Reath, LLP	Ballard, Spahr, Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP
Dechert, Price & Rhoads, LLP	
Montgomery, McCracken, Walker & Rhoads	

For more information, see <http://philadelphiabar.org/page/PublicInterestFellowship>

AMERICORPS/NATIONAL SERVICE LEGAL CORPS & AMERICORPS*VISTA. Americorps is a landmark national service initiative created in 1994 which involves 25,000 participants nationwide in community service programs.

*Americorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)* is a national and community service program that places its members at local sponsoring organizations to work on innovative and sustainable community development projects. Americorps *VISTA members receive a monthly living allowance, health insurance, and an educational voucher which may be used for loan repayment.

SKADDEN PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIP. This program awards fellowships annually 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. The application is usually due in early October. For more information, check out the website at www.skaddenfellowships.org

PSLawNet also contains a comprehensive list of fellowships and deadlines as well as tips on preparing fellowship applications.

Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP)

Widener University Commonwealth Law School has joined the growing number of law schools, bar associations and other organizations that are committed to training students for service in the public

interest. Under the LRAP program, graduates are afforded the opportunity to pursue their public interest career goals without the undue pressures of making loan payments. Graduates may apply to the program within three years of graduation and must secure a position within a non-profit organization that provides legal services which benefit the community, underrepresented groups or indigent people. Grants cover monthly law school loan debt up to thirty-six (36) months for loans which were certified by an ABA-Accredited law school financial aid office. Graduates with an annual salary of up to \$50,000 are eligible to apply for LRAP benefits. Please contact the Financial Aid Office for information.