

Public Interest and Government Careers and When to Apply

Definition of Public Interest Law Practice

In the public service, lawyers have six primary practice settings. We will briefly discuss each below. Students should be aware that there are many public interest lawyers who work in public service but in less traditional roles that utilize their legal training, analytical skills, and writing abilities. It is not always feasible to follow a predictable path towards gaining these roles, as they require a myriad of other skills.

Some examples might be:

Having served as the chief executive officer (or other positions that are not limited to law graduates) for a nonprofit organization or philanthropic foundation.

Implementing programs at a nonprofit organization that does not provide legal services to clients.

Staffing the office of an elected official or another government entity and proposing policy changes.

Serving as a public official (whether elected or appointed).

Reporting on legal issues for a media outlet.

Examples of Employers: Senate Judiciary Committee, Ford Foundation, New York State Assembly, Greenpeace, NPR.

See Also: [21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now \(or Ever Again\)](#)

Non-Profit Direct Services

In different kinds of cases, clients, many of [whom are indigent](#), are represented by a variety of [non-profit organizations](#). Several of the first-year law public interest students should engage in direct service practice through [the pro bono program](#).

Some examples of this kind of practice are:

Representing indigent clients in eviction or government benefits proceedings.

Helping engage in public outreach regarding changes in immigration law.

Advocating for a student with disabilities within the school system to enforce her legal rights to an Individual Education Plan.

Examples of Employers: Bay Area Legal Aid, Bronx Defenders, California Rural Legal Assistance, AIDS Legal Referral Panel.

What are some benefits of working for a nonprofit that offers direct legal services?

A number of clients will contact you on a regular basis (if not daily).

While you work with your clients to address their concerns, you will feel as though you are [making a real difference each day](#).

There is no such thing as a typical day.

What are some disadvantages of working for a nonprofit providing direct legal services?

In comparison with other sectors, pay is low.

Research and writing opportunities are limited.

Intense pressure may result from heavy cases.

How does a nonprofit focused on direct legal services hire?

Nonprofit Organizations rarely employ law school graduates as staff attorneys. Their limited-term fellowships are funded primarily by external sources of funding. With the help of funders like the Skadden Foundation, Equal Justice Works, and Stanford Law School, many Stanford Law School alumni have begun [careers in nonprofits](#) focused on direct legal services. [During the summer or even during the school year, students should consider volunteering for nonprofits in order to develop strong relationships with potential fellowship host organizations.](#)

Non-Profit Impact Litigation

The use of litigation in public interest practices has a broader impact than just on the individual client in each case. [Class actions are one way of doing this, as are individual lawsuits that challenge government policies and administrative processes that could yield successful results for a wide range of people.](#)

Some examples of this kind of practice are:

Litigation challenging an initiative prohibiting undocumented immigrant children from attending public schools.

Litigation establishing a national class of women who claim Wal-Mart has discriminated against them and are seeking damages as well as policy changes.

Inaction by the federal government regarding the Clean Water Act.

Examples of Employers: Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, Brennan Center for Justice, Natural Resources Defense Council, Legal Momentum, Legal Assistance Centre (Namibia).

What are some benefits of working for a nonprofit that offers impact litigation?

The systemic change you will create will protect vulnerable communities' rights statutory and constitutional. Research and writing on cutting-edge legal issues will be your responsibility.

What are some disadvantages of working for a nonprofit providing direct legal services?

In comparison to other sectors, low pay.

There are few opportunities for clients to contact you.

Litigation can take many years to produce results due to its slow pace.

What are the hiring practices for a nonprofit focused on impact litigation?

Nonprofit organizations rarely employ law school graduates as staff attorneys. Their limited-term fellowships are funded primarily by external sources of funding. With the help of funders like the Skadden Foundation, Equal Justice Works, and Stanford Law School, many Stanford Law School alumni have begun careers in nonprofits focused on direct legal services. During the summer or even during the school year, students should consider volunteering for nonprofits in order to develop strong relationships with potential fellowship host organizations.

Civil Governmental Practice

Attorneys play an important [role in government at every level \(federal, state, regional, and local\)](#) both by defending and enforcing government policy, as well as developing new government practices.

Some examples of this kind of practice include:

State Attorney General seeks damages for residents of the state who have health problems related to tobacco use by suing the tobacco industry.

Defending a Redevelopment Authority plan to change zoning designations of a neighborhood or a county sheriff's office being sued for police misconduct.

The Environmental Protection Agency suing manufacturers of toxic chemicals for dumping waste products

into public waters.

Drafting and interpreting international agreements for [government employers](#).

Examples of Employers: New York City Law Department, California Attorney General, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, U.S. State Department.

What are some advantages of working for a government agency focused on civil legal practice?

You may get to do extensive research and writing on cutting-edge legal issues.

You may represent the government in enforcing important public rights.

You have more resources to support your work compared to nonprofit organizations.

What are some disadvantages of working for a government agency focused on civil legal practices?

Lower pay compared to the private sector.

More limited opportunities for client contact.

You may be asked to defend laws you personally oppose.

The slow pace of litigation can mean it takes years to see results.

What are the hiring practices for a government agency focused on civil legal practice?

Many [government agencies](#) now offer entry-level attorneys governmental honors programs. The U.S. Department of Justice's Honors Program is one of the most well-known. There are also several programs offered by state and local governments for hiring attorneys. Most of those jobs go to attorneys who are willing to relocate to Washington, DC. In order to develop strong relationships with government agencies, students should volunteer at government agencies during the summer and possibly during the school year.

Criminal Practice

This type of law practice is probably most familiar to you. If a lawyer is engaged in criminal proceedings or criminal defense, they can operate locally, nationally, or internationally. There are criminal prosecution agencies and sometimes criminal defense agencies in counties and states (although in some smaller jurisdictions, lawyers have been appointed to represent indigent clients). Federal prosecutors and defenders are also available. Legal professionals may work in intergovernmental agencies or criminal policy departments of international tribunals. Individual clients are primarily represented in this form of practice. In the federal sphere, however, broad-based prosecutions of entire industries may be permitted.

Examples of Employers: Federal Defenders of San Diego, U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, Manhattan District Attorney's office, Public Defender Service of the District of Columbia, UN Office on Drugs and Crime, International Criminal Court.

What are some advantages of working for an employer-focused on criminal legal practice?

You will likely get the [most opportunity](#) for court time by representing the government or an indigent client in trials and/or appeals.

You may get to do extensive research and writing if you are working at the federal level.

You may have more resources to support your work compared to nonprofits.

What are some disadvantages in working for an employer-focused on criminal legal practices?

Lower pay compared to the private sector.

Criminal lawyers at the state/county level often handle high case volumes despite limited resources.

There is a risk of emotional burnout from the types of cases you handle.

What are the hiring practices for an employer-focused on criminal legal practice?

A minority of criminal law governmental agencies [hire](#) entry-level attorneys before graduation and/or bar passage. One of the most well-known programs is the U.S. Department of Justice's Honors Program. It is generally not the U.S Attorney's Program that hires entry-level Assistant U.S Attorneys, which is part of DOJ. However, there are some exceptions. Other hiring programs are provided by state and local governments, as well. In some competitive markets such as San Francisco Bay Area, there are opportunities to be hired outright as a trial lawyer, though a few offer "post-bar law clerk" programs where graduates are expected to work (or volunteer) for very little pay until they are admitted to the bar. Members of the Bar can apply for trial attorney positions once they are active members. To build strong relationships with government agencies, students should volunteer at government agencies during the summer and possibly during the school year. Several criminal defense lawyers start their careers by joining small firms or by applying for positions with court-appointed panels. Many criminal defense attorneys open their own firms after gaining experience elsewhere.

Private Public Interest Law Firms

The public interest segment of law practice is a growing area within a private firm practice.

Examples of this kind of practice include:

- Union-side labor law firms.

- Law firms that will only represent plaintiffs in discrimination cases.

- Law firms that will only represent defendants in criminal cases.

These practices are offered by a wide range of firms.

Examples of Employers: Altshuler Berzon LLP, Bredhoff & Kaiser PLLC, Brown, Goldstein & Levy, LLP, Emery Celli Brinckerhoff & Abady LLP, Leonard Carder LLP; Miner, Barnhill & Galland, P.C., Neufeld Scheck & Brustin LLP, Phillips and Cohen LLP, Relman Dane & Colfax PLLC, Sanford Heisler LLP; Shute, Mihaly & Weinberger LLP; and Strumwasser & Woocher LLP

What are some advantages of working for a private-public interest law firm?

- Higher salaries compared to nonprofits with similarly rewarding work.

- You may get to do extensive research and writing.

- You have more resources to support your work compared to nonprofits.

What are some disadvantages of working for a private-public interest law firm?

- Lower pay compared to the corporate sector.

- Reliance on court-awarded attorneys' fees for prevailing plaintiffs may mean declining to represent plaintiffs whose defendants lack deep pockets.

What are the hiring practices for law firms representing the public interest?

Firms that specialize in public interest law hire in a wide variety of ways. Students while still in law school may even be able to apply for limited-term fellowships. While others prefer laterals or at least someone who has held one or two clerkships. For building strong relationships with these firms, students should consider working at private public interest law firms during their summers and possibly during the school year. Many firms will only accept applications from 2L summer associates, while others will accept applications from 1Ls. Most positions are paid, but some very small firms do not pay.

International Public Interest

International aspects are part of almost every legal topic-from corporate law to intellectual property law, to

national security law to public health law. Many aspects of public international law are governed by regimes that fall under this law. The field and practice can be enriched by analyzing foreign legal systems closely.

There is no way to cover all possible international public interest careers here. Research and reflection are essential to focusing your training and refocusing your job search if you are considering practicing internationally.

Some examples of international public interest legal practice include:

International legal work for the US government.

Domestic or international legal work for a foreign government.

Legal counsel work at an intergovernmental organization such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc., which regularly addresses both public international law and comparative law questions.

Human rights monitoring, litigation, and advocacy work at a non-governmental organization.

Litigation, advocacy, and capacity-building work at a non-governmental organization that works in transitional societies advancing rule of law and human rights.

Examples of Employers: US State Department, US Treasury Department, Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Relations, Chilean Ministry of Finance, The Supreme Court of Rwanda, the United Nations, The World Bank, The International Finance Corporation, Human Rights Watch, Center for Justice and Accountability, PILNet, American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative.

What are some advantages of working in international public interest positions?

It can be highly rewarding to work in transitional countries, both personally and professionally. There are frequently fundamental decisions being made about the structure and function of a nation's legal system, and as a practitioner of rule of law and human rights, you can have a significant impact on those decisions. A relatively inexperienced public interest lawyer can often enjoy more independence and autonomy in a field environment as compared to an established and stable employment environment in the US. One of the benefits of this type of practice is being able to travel internationally and being exposed to different cultures and languages.

What are some disadvantages of working in international public interest positions?

There can be a lot of chaos and instability at work, even to the point of posing a danger. Inexperienced lawyers may be concerned about not receiving the best training and mentoring opportunities, depending on the organization and role. Sometimes they feel unprepared to handle the responsibility of performing their jobs and representing their organization's interests, but lawyers are often expected to do that. A work-life balance can be difficult to achieve due to frequent international travel and field assignments.

What are the hiring practices for international public interest positions?

In international public interest practice, there is no single or guaranteed path to a career, since this work is so diverse, and since [many employers in this field have fewer resources](#) than private firms to offer formal training for new attorneys. Even though there are some entry-level positions, it is usually necessary to take short-term positions, work as a consultant, or apply for fellowships or grants to fund your research. With flexibility and persistence, however, you will be able to create opportunities in spite of the competitive market.

What Is the Timetable for Legal Recruitment?

Government

General Information

Law students have many volunteer opportunities with government agencies, including those at the federal, state, and local levels.

Government positions held by law students are usually unpaid. Many law schools offer summer funding and course credit.

First-Year Summer

Except for a few agencies with lengthy background check requirements, you cannot begin applying to government agencies until December 1.

Many students wait until after their first semester finals are over before applying.

The majority of government agencies do not begin interviewing for summer positions until January or February, and many will not complete the process until March or April.

Second-Year Summer

Federal government hiring may begin as early as August, but typically continues throughout the fall and sometimes even into the spring.

From October through late winter, you can interview with government agencies at national and regional job fairs.

It usually takes until November or December for local or state governments to hire. There are exceptions, however.

Entry-Level Hiring

Typically, [entry-level attorneys](#) are only employed by a few federal agencies. Those who do so generally hire through specific federal hiring programs, such as the Presidential Management Fellows program.

Federal government hiring may begin as early as August, but typically continues throughout the fall and sometimes even into the spring.

From October through late winter, you can interview with government agencies at national and regional job fairs.

In most states and localities, entry-level lawyers are not hired by government agencies. Some offices have different timelines than others, such as public defenders and prosecutors in different states.

It is common for state and local government hiring to begin in November/December and to extend into March or April. Prosecutors and public defenders may begin their recruitment processes in the early fall.

State and local agencies often wait to make an offer for a permanent job until after you have graduated and passed the bar exam.

Public Interest

General Information

A majority of public interest law student positions are unpaid. Several law schools offer summer funding or credit, and outside grants may also be available.

Law students can volunteer with public interest organizations during the summer and during the school year.

First-Year Summer

Until December 1, you cannot apply to public interest organizations.

The process of applying to colleges generally begins after the first semester's finals have been completed.

Most public interest organizations do not begin interviewing first-year law students until January or February, and many do not complete the process until March or April.

Second-Year Summer

Public interest hiring begins in October and can continue into March or April.

In October and into late winter, you can attend national and regional job fairs to interview with public interest employers.

Entry-Level Hiring

[Entry-level attorneys](#) are rarely hired by public interest organizations. Some employers begin the hiring process as soon as the fall, but most prefer to hire sometime after you have graduated and passed the bar.

Some organizations offer post-graduate jobs as fellowships. Fellowship applications for fellowships designed by you are typically due in the fall and decisions are typically made in December or January.

Fellowships offered in law school during the third year have varying timelines.

The opportunity to interview with employers from public interest groups starts in October and continues until

late winter.

See Also:

[6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from Their Resumes ASAP If They Want to Get Jobs with the Most Prestigious Law Firms](#)

[Leave Sex, Politics, Religion, and Social Activism out of Your Job Search and Career If You Want to Work in a Large Law Firm](#)

[Attorney Resume and Cover Letter Advice](#)

[How "Out" Should I Be on My Attorney Resume?](#)