

Public Interest Law Firms

Public interest law firms are for-profit businesses that work, at least in part, for underrepresented individuals or groups, or specialize in areas with a nexus to social justice. Some firms have a multitude of different practice areas, while others specialize in a single area (e.g., criminal defense, employment and/or labor law, civil rights, environmental law). Public interest law firms come in all sizes, but are generally smaller than large corporate law firms. Every firm has a different way of defining its public interest mission, and how that mission interacts with its for-profit status. Harvard Law School publishes the [Private Public Interest and Plaintiffs' Firm Guide](#) with helpful background information on this sector and a relatively comprehensive list of firms.

It is important that you use your time in law school – through clinics, classes, student activities and summer or term-time internships – to develop the skills, knowledge and experiences that are critical to a successful career in this field. A demonstrated commitment to public service generally, or to the specific area the firm focuses on if it specializes, is critical to obtaining a job with this type of employer.

Clinics

Clinics can be very useful for developing the skills, knowledge and expertise needed to practice at a public interest law firm. For students interested in firms with a specialized focus (e.g., environmental or labor/employment) students should seek out clinics that allow them to demonstrate a commitment to, and an expertise in, the subject matter of those firms. In addition, it is helpful for most students interested in public interest law firms to develop their litigation skills, with a focus on complex federal litigation.

Classes

In addition to classes specifically relevant to the subject matter of specialized firms, students should also consider taking classes that will improve their knowledge of litigation, for example, Evidence, Federal Courts, Civil Litigation, and Complex Litigation.

Internships

Both summer and term-time internships can help you develop skills, expertise and connections that will be very helpful for your post-graduate job search. A wide variety of public interest internships will be viewed favorably by public interest law firms, and it is not necessary to work at a public interest law firm during law school in order to work at one after graduation. NYU provides financial support for all 1L and 2L students working in a public interest summer internship through [PILC Summer Funding](#).

If, however, you know you want to work at a public interest law firm after graduation, it can make sense to work at one during law school, both to confirm your interest and to develop your network and relevant skills. Be aware that very few public interest law firms regularly make permanent job offers to their summer associates. If you choose to work at a public interest law firm during either your 1L or 2L summer, many firms are able to pay their summer associates. This salary, while often less than “Big Law,” is usually higher than the PILC summer funding amount.

If you choose to work for a public interest law firm that does not pay its summer associates, be aware that there are restrictions on PILC Summer Funding for work at public interest law firms. Specifically, PILC will not provide funding unless the following criteria are certified by the firm:

- The law firm is a predominately public interest firm (at least 51% of time is spent on public interest matters);
- The student will be working solely on public interest matters;
- The student's time will not be billed and the firm will not submit the student's time in a later application for attorney's fees; and
- The firm will not pay any of its student interns during the summer.

Post-Graduate Opportunities

Post-graduate hiring varies significantly between firms. A few firms hire summer associates and make entry-level offers to those associates; others hire regularly on an entry-level basis; while most hire on an as-needed basis, often with some preference for those who have clerked and/or have a year or two of experience. For many firms, grades are a relevant factor in the hiring process. Some public interest law firms, but not all, are open to hiring students who have worked at corporate law firms, either during law school or for a short time after law school. Entry-level salaries range widely, but usually are no lower than \$70,000 and sometimes are significantly more.

In addition to permanent hiring, a number of public interest law firms offer entry-level fellowships. Selected fellowships are listed below:

- [Altshuler Berzon LLP, NRDC Fellowship](#) (various; fellowship is focused on environmental)
- [Bernabei & Kabat, PLLC, Civil Rights Litigation Fellowship](#) (employment)
- [Brown Goldstein Levy, Disability Rights Fellowship](#) (various; applicants must have a disability)
- [Cohen Milstein, Fellowship Program](#) (various)
- [David Rosen & Associates PC, Thomas Emerson Fellowship](#) (various)
- [Gibbons, John J. Gibbons Fellowship in Public Interest & Constitutional Law](#) (various)
- [Goldstein, Borgen, Dardarian & Ho, Social Justice Fellowship](#) (various)
- [Gupta Wessler, Fellowship in Appellate and Constitutional Litigation](#) (various)
- [Loevy & Loevy, Justice Fellowship](#) (wrongful conviction, civil rights, whistleblower)
- [MacDonald, Hoague & Bayless](#) (civil rights, immigration) - Seattle
- [Murphy Anderson PLLC, George R. Murphy Public Interest Fellowship](#) (labor, employment, whistleblower)
- [Neufeld Scheck & Brustin, LLP, Cochran Fellowship](#) (civil rights, criminal defense)
- [Outten & Golden, Public Interest Fellowship](#) (employment)
- [Sanford Heisler Sharp, Litigation Fellowship](#) (employment, whistleblower, other)
- [Shute Mihaly & Weinberger LLP, Fellowships](#) (environmental)
- [Tycko & Zavareei, Public Interest Fellowship](#) (various)

Please note that positions at some (but not all) public interest law firms qualify for LRAP, but not for the income-driven plan. If you are interested in this field you should make an appointment with an OSFS counselor to discuss your specific situation in detail.

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