



Jobs in Public Interest Law

Public interest law covers a wide variety of diverse legal activities. The term public interest law in itself is very ambiguous and somewhat hard to define as people have their own interpretation of what public interest is. Conservatives argue that the possibility of a free market and regulated speech constitutes public interest, while the liberals argue that public interest refers to a regulated market and free speech. Meanwhile, special interest groups with political agendas pursue their political interests in lieu of a broad party platform. These special interest groups might view their activism as promoting the wider public interest. Sometimes such interests clash, as in the question of abortion, where protagonists of choice and life forces fight for the hearts and minds of the people.



To lawyers and law students, public interest practice means legal services or public advocacy offices as well as non-profit organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union. Another vital division of the public interest market is the private public interest law firms, which operate on many of the same issues addressed by non-profit public interest legal organizations and government agencies, but in a law firm setting. A second, and sometimes

overlapping, category of private firms known as “plaintiffs’ firms” represents individuals and groups seeking to redress injuries with monetary damages, commonly in the fields of personal injury, medical misconduct, product liability, and securities fraud.

No official test exists to determine what makes a firm a “private public interest law firm.” It is a rather stretchy term, used to describe private, for-profit firms that dedicate at least a significant portion of their caseload to matters that have some broad social, political, or economic impact. Firms that fall under this expansive definition come in a great variety of sizes—everything from a solo practitioner to a multi-city, 150+ lawyer operation—and work in an even greater variety of subject areas—everything from criminal defense to international human rights.

Like customary non-profit public interest organizations, public interest law firms usually have a particular social, political, or economic vision that includes helping underrepresented groups and/or promoting change. Public interest firms, like traditional non-profits, bring cases that will advocate their vision. For example, a public interest law firm might represent employees charging their employer with unlawful discrimination or consumers charging a financial institution with misleading practices.

However, unlike traditional non-profits, public interest firms operate as for-profit businesses. Public interest firms rely on the fees generated by their cases, rather than foundation grants or tax dollars, to pay the rent and remunerate their lawyers. Thus, a public interest firm looks not only at the merits but also at the potential profitability of a case in deciding whether to take it on. Firms have dissimilar means for ensuring their financial stability. Some firms split their practice so that profit-run client work can finance the public interest docket; at many such firms, associates are usually required to work on both kinds of matters. Other firms choose only to represent clients that further their public interest agenda, but more strictly scrutinize the financial implications of each case.

Usually the subject matter of the cases distinguishes a public interest firm from other private law firms. The most common areas of practice for public interest firms include civil rights, prisoners’ rights, immigration law, labor law, occupational health and safety, criminal defense, product liability, and insurance liability. A second important distinction, according to one attorney, is the kind of clients public interest firms represent. Public interest firms generally charge clients for their services and make decisions on whom to represent with at least some concern for the finances of a case.

Public interest firms are frequently paid on a contingency basis, meaning the firm does not charge the client a fee unless he or she wins the case. If the case is won, the firm takes a percentage of the settlement or court award. If the lawsuit is lost, the client pays nothing. Plaintiffs’ firms work on contingency in the great majority of their cases. Public interest firms must necessarily choose the contingency cases they take on carefully, investigating the facts before agreeing to represent a client, judging the likelihood of success, and estimating the expense of litigating the case.

Lawyers are drawn to public interest firms due to their passion for the issues the firms address and the clients



Public Interest Job Feature

they serve. Globally, public interest firm lawyers cite the shared commitment of their colleagues as a major advantage of their practices. Public interest law firms look for the usual credentials when hiring, such as a strong academic background and good research and writing skills. However, unlike traditional law firms, public interest law firms also look for experience in and commitment to the subject areas of the firm's practice. Public interest experience, in the form of clinical work, summer jobs, and/or academic-year activities, is critical. Because of the significant responsibility young attorneys are given in public interest firms, the firms seek candidates who are self-starting and quick to learn.

For those students interested in career opportunities with public interest firms, several points are worth considering. To identify potential openings, you have to network! Contact

alumni from your law school and keep in touch with people with whom you work during the summer. The goal is to stay well connected. When investigating a firm, look at what kind of cases they do, for whom you will be working, what kind of structure the firm has, and what kinds of things they let new people do. Your investigation should be content driven; you should seek to find out what they actually do at the firm. Finally, when considering a specific firm, have very frank conversations with the firm's associates and hear from them the kind of work that you would be expected to do. These are just some of the things you should keep in mind for your search to be successful.

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