

There is a wide range of options for a career in public interest law. For a comprehensive overview of the world of public interest careers, please review the [JD Public Interest Job Search Handbook](#) or the [LLM Public Interest Job Search Handbook](#). Please also review the relevant PILC handbooks and Subject Guides, linked below, on the [PILC Career Resources webpage](#).

### LEGAL/PRACTICE AREAS

This refers to the issue areas in which you are interested in working. A non-exhaustive list of public interest practice areas includes:

- animal rights
- children and family
- civil rights
- consumer protection
- criminal justice
- disability rights
- education law
- elder law
- [environmental justice & land use](#)
- health law
- housing & homelessness
- immigration
- IP and cyber law
- intl human rights
- international law
- juvenile justice
- [labor & employment](#)
- LGBTQ+ rights
- nonprofit law
- election law
- government benefits
- racial justice
- reproductive rights
- tax law
- tribal law
- veterans' rights
- victims' rights
- voting rights
- women's rights

### TYPES OF WORK

This refers to the nature of the work that you will be doing. For many legal areas, there are opportunities in a number of different practice settings.

#### Public Defense

Public defenders are attorneys appointed to represent people who are charged with crimes and who are unable to afford an attorney, pursuant to the 1963 Supreme Court ruling in *Gideon v. Wainwright* that defendants have a right to counsel in criminal cases. Following *Gideon*, states established or expanded public defender systems. These systems vary widely in structure, size, philosophy, approach, and quality. In addition to state-level, trial-level criminal defense, there are other types of public defense, including family, juvenile, capital, appellate, and federal defense.

#### Civil Legal Services

Civil legal services provide direct legal representation to individual clients who cannot afford attorneys. They focus on civil legal issues including housing, government benefits, family law, immigration law, employment, consumer protection and other areas affecting low-income populations. Some offices specialize in one area of the law or serve specific populations, while many provide a range of civil legal services to a wide range of individuals. These jobs require strong client interaction and advocacy skills. In addition to direct representation of individual clients, many civil legal services organizations also utilize strategies such as impact litigation, legislative advocacy, and community organizing.

#### Law Reform & Policy

Law reform work focuses on achieving systemic change on a particular issue through impact litigation or legislative advocacy. Instead of meeting the immediate legal needs of individual clients, law reform & policy work pursues large-scale reform that will affect many people. Law reform work can be found at the state, regional and national level. Most organizations that engage in this work exclusively focus on law reform, but there are some primarily direct services organizations that also have law reform practices, e.g., The Legal Aid Society's Law Reform Unit.

#### Government

Working for the government is a great way to engage with the community at large and to work in almost any practice area that excites you. Government lawyers can be litigators, work on policy matters that affect everything from the environment to civil rights, draft legislation and regulations, and engage in significant transactions that concern domestic or international issues. Government lawyers report high satisfaction with their work, take on significant responsibility early in their careers, develop excellent skills, and make a significant impact. In the challenging public interest job market, government offices are dependable sources of jobs, and many provide good compensation and great benefits.

## Prosecution

Attorneys who choose to work in a prosecutor's office usually have a passion for criminal justice. Many are also eager to appear in court and try cases. Criminal justice reform and a commitment to preserving civil rights are topics that are at the forefront of discussions taking place in many prosecutors' offices around the country. If you want to be a prosecutor, you will be able to identify prosecutors' offices organized around the mission of achieving fairness and justice. Prosecutors are found at the local, state, and federal levels of government. State and local crimes are typically prosecuted by district attorneys' offices and/or the criminal division of state attorney generals' offices.

## International Public Interest Law

International public interest work covers a wide range of topics, including: human rights, international criminal law, international environmental law, finance and development, international trade, law reform, refugees and migration, and corporate social responsibility. There is also a wide variety of types of employers whose work centers, or touches upon, international public interest law issues, including: large intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) like the UN and the World Bank, regional IGOs like the African Development Bank and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, NGOs of every size in every country, and government jobs in the United States and abroad. Many attorneys move from one topic area to another, from the private to the public sector, and from domestic to international issues.

## Private 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 legal area. Public interest law firms come in all sizes, but are generally smaller than large corporate law firms.

## WHAT MATTERS TO EMPLOYERS

**Commitment & Experience:** Different public interest fields prioritize different skillsets and experience, but one common overriding requirement is a passion for and demonstrated commitment to the work of the organization. Sometimes this is specific to the legal area – for example, a successful applicant to a voting rights position will need to have experience in voting rights. For others, it may be more general – for example, for a housing litigation position, while housing-specific experience is a plus, more important is strong client and advocacy skills and a commitment to working on behalf of low-income communities.

**Law School Activities:** Clinics are strongly recommended! All other law school activities can be beneficial, but better to excel and take a leadership role in a smaller number of activities than be less involved in many. Think about the skills/experience you need to round out your background, particularly in the context of the work that you are hoping to do. For example, if you have a background in client services but are interested in working in impact litigation, focus on experiences that will help to develop your research, writing and federal litigation experience. If you want to do direct services but have not had client work before, consider internships, clinics or student groups that work directly with clients.

**Language Skills:** It is not a requirement, but the ability to speak a language other than English can give you a big advantage in most direct services work. Spanish is the most needed, but French, Mandarin and other languages can be invaluable for groups who work in communities that speak those languages. Even the ability to engage in basic communication with your clients can be helpful. There are many options for learning or improving your language skills. You can take language classes through NYU and there are plenty of community classes and meetups in NYC. Several students have had good experiences connecting with affordable one-on-one language teachers through Zoom.

## FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Finances can be a major concern when considering a public interest career. NYU encourages its graduates to pursue public service and wants to minimize the impact of debt on career choice, and provides a robust [LRAP program](#) to help graduates pursuing public interest careers repay the cost of their legal education. PILC strongly suggests that students meet with an LRAP counselor from the [Office of Financial Services](#) during their 1L or 2L year to discuss their individual situation as it relates to loans.

## ROUGH TIMELINES FOR POST-GRADUATE PUBLIC INTEREST HIRING

For more detailed guidance, please review PILC's [JD Public Interest Job Search Handbook](#) or [LLM Public Interest Job Search Handbook](#) and other relevant handbooks (linked below and available at [PILC's Career Resources page](#)).

	Overview	Rising 3L summer	Fall 3L/LLM Year	Early Spring 3L/LLM	Late Spring 3L/LLM
<b><u>Post-Graduate Fellowships</u></b>	<p><b>Project Fellowships</b> involve partnering with a host organization, developing a project proposal and submitting to a fellowship funder.</p> <p><b>Organizational Fellowships</b> are essentially time-limited staff attorney jobs funded by the hiring organization or an established source.</p> <p>See <a href="#">Post-Grad Fellowships Handbook</a> for information about specific fellowships as well as application and interview tips.</p>	<p>Host org search for <b>project fellowships</b> – aim to finalize by early August; project proposal development – talk to mentors, supervisors, professors, etc.</p> <p>First few <b>organizational fellowship</b> applications due.</p>	<p><b>Project fellowships:</b> <a href="#">Skadden &amp; EJW</a> (due Sept); <a href="#">Justice Catalyst</a> (due Nov/Dec).</p> <p>Skadden decisions mid-Nov. EJW rolling interviews and offers starting late Nov.</p> <p>Many regularly offered <b>organizational, academic</b> and <b>international fellowships</b> are due in the fall.</p>	<p><b>Project fellowships:</b> <a href="#">Kirkland &amp; Ellis</a> (Jan); <a href="#">NYU PILC &amp; RJWR</a> fellowships (early March).</p> <p>JC interviews/offers late Jan/Feb. EJW continues rolling interviews and offers throughout the spring.</p> <p><b>Organizational, academic</b> and <b>international fellowships</b> offered throughout spring.</p>	<p>EJW announces final selections late April/early May.</p> <p>Organizational fellowships that are posted in the spring are generally newly funded or singularly funded fellowships. Some may be hiring asap, though it may be worth applying in case they are able/willing to wait.</p>
<b><u>Criminal Defense</u></b>	<p>Public defense hiring generally starts around August or September.</p> <p>See <a href="#">Public Defender Handbook</a> for hiring timelines and process of offices around the country, as well as application and interview tips.</p>	<p>Some public defender offices expedite the hiring process for current 2L interns, and a few may even make offers at the end of the summer. Most public defender offices give priority to current and former interns when making hiring decisions.</p>	<p>Many public defender offices have deadlines in the fall and conduct interviews and make decisions before January. A number of public defender offices accept applications and interview at Fall <a href="#">OCI</a> and/or the <a href="#">EJW Fair</a>. Some offices post on <a href="#">PSJD</a>.</p>	<p><a href="#">NYU PILC Fair</a>. Individual postings on PSJD, CSM, and organization websites.</p>	<p>Some PD offices are still hiring for the fall in the Spring. Check individual postings and review the PD Handbook for an office's typical timeline.</p>
<b><u>Civil Legal Services</u></b>	<p>Most CLS jobs are posted ad hoc when hiring is needed. Some NYC orgs may post early for a fall class of housing attorneys.</p> <p>See <a href="#">JD Public Interest Job Search Handbook</a> for application and interview tips.</p>	<p>CLS orgs are mainly making project fellowship sponsoring decisions during the summer, but unlikely to do direct hiring for the following fall.</p>	<p>Large NYC orgs (LAS, MFJ, LSNYC, NYLAG) may post for fall class hiring in housing. Some civil legal services post-grad fellowships due in fall.</p>	<p><a href="#">NYU PILC Fair</a>. Also look on <a href="#">PSJD</a> and individual employers' career sites. Look for fall class hiring in housing.</p>	<p>By spring, some orgs may be willing to wait until the fall for a great candidate, so it is usually worth applying.</p>
<b><u>Government</u></b>	<p>Most government job postings can be found on <a href="#">Arizona Handbook</a>, <a href="#">USAJOBS.gov</a> &amp; CSM. See <a href="#">Government Handbook</a> for application and interview tips.</p>	<p>Post-grad jobs &amp; fellowships start being posted around July 15.</p>	<p>Many post-grad government positions have early fall deadlines. Look for government employers at <a href="#">OCI &amp; EIW</a>.</p>	<p>Some state or federal honors programs have deadlines in the spring.</p>	<p>Postings on <a href="#">Arizona Handbook</a> and CSM.</p> <p>Check specific prosecutors' office websites for any "off cycle" hiring.</p>

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<b><u>Prosecution</u></b>	Most prosecutor's offices post job openings on their own sites and do not use the Arizona Handbook. Hiring timelines vary significantly by region. See <a href="#">Prosecution Handbook</a> for application and interview tips.	Most NE prosecutors' offices (NYC, Philly, Boston) open applications around July 15 or Aug 1.	NV and AZ generally open applications in the fall.	CA prosecutors' offices generally open in the winter or spring, and most offer post-bar Law Clerk roles and only accept actual ADA apps once a student has passed the Bar.	
<b><u>Law Reform &amp; Policy</u></b>	Nearly all immediately post-grad hiring is through project or organizational fellowships. See <a href="#">Post-Graduate Fellowships</a> section above. See <a href="#">JD Public Interest Post-Graduate Handbook</a> for more information.	Some fellowships have summer deadlines.	Most annual (usually named) fellowships have application deadlines in the fall.	Some annual fellowships have early spring deadlines. There may be some limited ad-hoc fellowships.	There may be some ad-hoc fellowships posted in the late spring.
<b><u>Public Interest Private Law Firms</u></b>	Few public interest firms hire right out of law school. Those that do hire through firm-sponsored fellowships or on an ad-hoc basis, for the most part. A very small handful hires associates from their summer associate pool.	Some firm-sponsored fellowship deadlines are in August.	One public interest private law firm interviews for a post-graduate fellowship through Fall OCI. Many firm-sponsored fellowships have fall deadlines.	Some firm-sponsored fellowships have early spring deadlines.	There may be very limited ad-hoc hiring in late spring, based on need.
<b><u>International</u></b>	Most international post-grad positions are through fellowships, with deadlines throughout the year. Contract work and volunteering are also common ways to break into the field.  See <a href="#">International Public Interest Handbook</a> for a select list of job search websites (appendix 2) and international fellowships (appendices 4 & 5), and application/interview tips.	There may be limited fellowships that have summer deadlines.	Some international fellowships have early fall deadlines.  <b><i>NYU-specific Fellowships:</i></b> <a href="#">Masiyiwa-Bernstein Fellowship Program</a> <a href="#">Human Rights in China Fellowship</a>  <b><i>For LLMs only:</i></b> <a href="#">International Finance and Development Fellowship</a>	Many international fellowships have early spring deadlines.  <b><i>International Fellowships:</i></b> <a href="#">Arthur Helton Global Human Rights Fellowship</a> (Due Feb); the <a href="#">International Court of Justice Judicial Fellow Programme</a> (Due Jan); and the <a href="#">LLM Public Interest Fellowship</a> (Due March).	There may be some fellowships posted in the late spring.  Students should begin to apply to open, non-fellowship positions around March.