

PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

Handout Series #10

WHY PRACTICE PUBLIC INTEREST LAW?

Many law students enter law school with ideals about using the law to help those less fortunate than themselves and to somehow "make a difference" in society. They are willing to forego the large salaries and prestige of the major law firms, where new associates may spend years researching issues and writing memos for corporate clients, for the chance to work on real legal problems of real people. Working in the public interest sector is a way to keep those ideals alive and to reap rewards that are not measured solely in dollar amounts.

WHAT IS PUBLIC INTEREST LAW?

Public interest work generally encompasses all types of law practice in a non-profit or not-for-profit setting. The primary goals of such practice are usually concepts like justice, equity and advancement of the public good, rather than commercial or financial gain. It may be issue-oriented work done for the purpose of influencing policy on issues affecting society as a whole, or it may be client-oriented work that helps individuals who are otherwise under-represented in the legal system. Public interest practice includes work done by non-profit organizations, government agencies at all levels, and pro bono activities of otherwise for-profit law firms and corporations. A sampling of the types of law that public interest lawyers work on includes civil rights, children's issues, consumer law, criminal law, education, health and elder law, housing and poverty law, immigration, international human rights, public benefits, environmental issues and women's rights, to name but a few.

WHAT KIND OF PERSON SUCCEEDS IN PUBLIC INTEREST PRACTICE?

Some in the legal profession believe that only a lawyer who is not good enough to work for a major law firm would take a job in public interest. Nothing could be further from the truth. Public interest firms and agencies want to hire attorneys who have demonstrated dedication to public interest work, who are highly capable, and whose primary motivation for working is not to make a lot of money. Because public interest employers are limited by tight budgets, they have limited openings for new hires, and they often cannot recruit on law school campuses or advertise those jobs openings that do occur. As a result, networking and persistence may be even more important to obtaining a public interest job than they are for being hired as an attorney generally.

Public interest practice covers a broad spectrum of philosophies and political ideologies, from extremely conservative to extremely liberal. Because public interest employers seek to hire

lawyers who are dedicated to their office's cause or purpose, self-assessment is an extremely important first step to determining if public interest practice is right for you. A separate Career Development Office handout contains self-assessment exercises to help you focus on the type of law practice that is right for you. In addition, Deborah Aaron's book, What You Can Do With a Law Degree, which can be checked out from the CDO library, has an excellent section on self-assessment, with numerous exercises to try.

WHAT ABOUT LAW SCHOOL DEBT?

Many of the law students who entered law school with high ideals about serving the public interest find themselves having to work for regular law firms just so that they can make enough money to pay their student loans. Public interest summer internships are often unpaid, and public interest salaries for attorneys lag far behind those in the private sector. This is a perennial problem which in many cases does preclude pursuing a public interest career. There are ways, however, to avoid being caught in the trap created by high law school debt. The key is in careful planning.

Work closely throughout law school with the McGeorge Financial Aid office. Take out only the amount of loans that are absolutely necessary, and remember the adage that "if you live like a lawyer when you are a student, you will live like a student when you are a lawyer."

WHAT ABOUT SUMMER EMPLOYMENT?

McGeorge has an active Public Legal Services Society ("PLSS"), a student organization which promotes opportunities for students to do public interest work both during school and after graduation. PLSS, in conjunction with CDO and the Financial Aid office, administers a summer grant program for students who want to do an summer internship for a public interest organization and would otherwise be uncompensated. Grant awards in recent years have been several thousand dollars per student, and they are awarded by a committee after reviewing individual student proposals for merit and dedication. Information about the summer grant program is made available through the Financial Aid office and PLSS during the spring semester.

A variety of sources also offer funding for unpaid summer internships on a national basis. The Public Interest Job Research Guide published by Harvard Law School and available in the CDO library contains a list of these funding resources, some of which are located in California and are intended for law students in California.

Even if funding is not available, many public interest organizations will qualify as off-campus clinics. This means that you can get units that toward your J.D. degree by completing a certain number of hours working for an organization. The Clinical Programs office at McGeorge, located in the Community Legal Services building, arranges a large number of externships with government and non-profit agencies, or you can set up your own clinic with a public interest agency if the organization meets certain qualifying criteria. See Professor Cecilia Arnold in Community Legal Services for more information about this program.

WHAT ABOUT EMPLOYMENT AFTER GRADUATION?

The Financial Aid office also administers the Loan Repayment Assistance Program ("LRAP") for McGeorge graduates who take public interest jobs. Alumni who work full-time as attorneys in a non-profit organization which represents persons who could not otherwise obtain such representation, and who otherwise meet minimum debt requirements, can have a portion of their

law school debt forgiven. A brochure available from the Financial Aid office describes how LRAP functions. Note that LRAP is funded and administered solely by McGeorge School of Law and is not backed by any lenders or government agencies. Some public interest or public sector employers may offer programs of their own which assist with law school loan repayment.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO FIND A PUBLIC INTEREST JOB?

Since there are so many public interest employers, and they have such a wide variety of practice areas, objectives and constituencies, the place to start is by doing research to find the employers that match your particular goals and interests (this assumes that you have already done enough self-assessment to know what your goals and interests are).

CDO RESOURCES:

The CDO and the McGeorge Library have a number of resources to help you identify public interest employers that you may want to target. [The Community Services Directory](#) lists every non-profit agency and organization in the Sacramento area, along with descriptions of what they do and contact information. Other communities have similar books of their own, although they may not be available through McGeorge. Public service and non-profit organizations throughout California that work with issues of interest to consumers are listed in [The California Handbook](#). There are also lists of public service employers around the United States in [The Public Service Employer Directory](#) published by the law schools of the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan; the [Public Interest Job Search Guide](#) put out by Harvard Law School; and the [Law School Guide to Public Interest Careers](#) published by the National Association for Law Placement.

PSLAWNET AND EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS:

There are two excellent on line resources for finding public interest jobs. The most comprehensive list of current public interest job and internship openings, both around the United States and internationally, can be found on line at www.pslawnet.org. Because McGeorge School of Law is a member of PSLawNet, there is no fee for McGeorge students and alumni to access this database. Although PSLawNet carries a vast number of job announcements, typically only a small number are listings for California. However, students interested in interning abroad or with an international organization should note that the website contains a considerable amount of information about international public interest organizations. In addition, PSLawNet contains descriptions and links to websites of many public interest groups as well as listings of organizations that offer fellowship funding for unpaid public interest positions.

McGeorge School of Law also belongs to Equal Justice Works (formerly the National Association for Public Interest Law or NAPIL). This organization's website, www.equaljusticeworks.org also provides listings of job openings in public interest law, a list of helpful publications, and links to other public interest resource websites. Equal Justice Works is the best source for obtaining a fellowship to help fund a public interest job or project (discussed in more detail below).

SELF-INITIATED CONTACTS:

Nationwide, only about 15% of job openings are ever advertised. The rest are filled through word of mouth. This is even more true for public interest employers than it is for legal employers generally, because public interest organizations lack the time or the funds to recruit on law school campuses or take out classified advertisements. Therefore, the best way to eventually get a job as a public interest lawyer is to begin networking at every opportunity you have.

Although for some people the word networking conjures up negative images of making small talk at cocktail parties, it is really simply about gathering information from everyone you know and everyone you meet. Once you have identified your personal interests and focused on specific public interest employers that match those interests, you can start by asking for informational interviews. Even busy people will usually be willing to spare twenty minutes to talk about what they do and how they got there. The CDO has separate handouts on networking and on informational interviewing that contain tips on tapping into the hidden job market (Informational Interviewing –Handout Series #5 and Networking Made Easy–Handout Series #9).

Fortunately, the tight budgets of public interest employers can work in your favor when it comes to getting experience. Because staffing is always thin, public interest organizations are usually very amenable to letting law students work as unpaid volunteers. Being a volunteer is a form of networking in itself. By showing the employer your dedication and abilities while working as a volunteer, you can gain an inside track on being hired for a paid position when one becomes available.

RESUMES AND COVER LETTERS

Separate CDO handouts describe how to put together the best resume and cover letter possible to send to a potential employer. Rather than repeat what is contained in those handouts, this paragraph will mention some points that are specific to resumes and cover letters for a public interest employer. First of all, do not make the mistake of thinking that one good resume and one good cover letter are all that you need. Both should be tailored as much as possible to the needs of the particular employer to whom they are being sent. Remember that the purpose of the cover letter is to induce the employer to look closely at your resume, and the purpose of the resume is to induce the employer to want to interview you. A form cover letter that seems to be part of a mass mailing will almost always result in immediate rejection, because it appears that you do not care enough about this particular employer to have crafted a personalized letter. Likewise, using the same resume in applying to a legal services clinic as you do to apply to a private law firm will likely result in neither employer seeing a resume that showcases the specific experience and abilities that they are looking for.

The most important thing to have in a cover letter is an explanation of why you want to work for this particular employer. Be sure to address this from the employer's perspective, that is, explain what you have to offer the employer, not why working for this employer would be great for you.

Your resume should include anything that will make you stand out to this particular employer. This includes law school courses you have taken that relate to what the employer does, work experience (whether legal or not) that shows your ability to handle responsibility and take initiative, and volunteer or community work that shows your commitment to the field of public interest and public service. A resume does not need to be a complete history of everything you have ever done; rather, it should contain all information about you that will make an employer want to interview you. Think about your resume from the perspective of the specific employers that you are targeting. You may think that spending your junior year of college abroad was a life-enriching experience, but a legal services clinic that services people living below the poverty line may be more interested in your experience as a volunteer for a local food bank. Look at the sample cover letter and resume attached to this handout. They are specifically written for public interest employers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR JOBS IN PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

As a McGeorge student, you can participate in two different public interest career fairs

during the school year. Over one hundred public interest employers, including some from federal, state and local government agencies, attend the Public Interest/Public Sector Career Fair sponsored by the Northern California Consortium of Law Schools and held at UC Hastings Law School in San Francisco each February. Many of the employers hold formal job interviews at this event, while others have tables set up to disseminate information about their organizations.

Also in February, McGeorge holds its own public interest job fair in conjunction with the school's PLSS. Approximately thirty public interest employers from the Sacramento area participate in this event held at the Student Center.

If you really want to work for a particular organization, but the employer doesn't have the funds to hire you, there are many opportunities to receive funding for one to three years through a fellowship. These are offered by many foundations, but the largest number are funded or arranged by Equal Justice Works. Obtaining a fellowship requires completing a proposal which explains how the proposed project will benefit the community being served. Sometimes, a public interest organization will propose its own fellowship project, without a specific fellow in mind, but many proposals are made by the fellow and the organization together. Further information about fellowships generally, with links to other funding groups, as well as application forms and descriptions of how to get an Equal Justice Works fellowship, can be found at the www.equaljusticeworks.org website.

COVER LETTER:

Laura K. Ingalls
3200 Fifth Avenue
Sacramento, CA 95817

October 15, 2001

Mary Smith, Esq.
Executive Director
Bay Area Advocates
10 Union Street
San Francisco, CA 94115

Dear Ms. Smith,

I am a second year student at University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law, and I am interested in working with your organization next summer. Having grown up in the Bay Area, I hope to return there after law school and continue the work of protecting the legal rights of the underprivileged which I began during my undergraduate studies at UC, Berkeley.

This past summer, I clerked with a small Sacramento real estate firm which commits substantial time to working pro bono for low income clients involved in housing disputes. This allowed me to gain valuable legal experience in a private firm while still being involved in the public interest issues to which I am committed. I hope to put my knowledge, experience and commitment to work for Bay Area Advocates next summer so that I can help you in performing your valuable services to the less fortunate persons in our society.

My enclosed resume gives more details about my education and experience. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my qualifications with you in person. I will call your office next week to see if a mutually agreeable time can be arranged. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura K. Ingalls

SAMPLE RESUME:

LAURA K. INGALLS
3200 Fifth Avenue
Sacramento, CA 95817
(916) 555-1212 Lingalls@uop.edu

EDUCATION

University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law	Sacramento, CA
Juris Doctor to be conferred 2003	
Activities:	
Women's Caucus, Event Chairperson	2001 - 2002
Public Legal Services Society, Secretary	2001 - 2002
Environmental Law Forum, Member	2000 - 2001
Honors:	
First Year Mock Trial Competition, Finalist	2001
 University of California, Berkeley	 Berkeley, CA
Bachelor of Arts, Political Science, conferred 2000	
Honors:	
Dean's List	1998 - 2000

EXPERIENCE

Ketchum, Cookem and Eatom, Sacramento, CA	Summer 2001
Law Clerk	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Researched and wrote memoranda on various issues for real estate and landlord/tenant disputes.● Drafted pre-trial motions and other legal documents.● Reviewed documents submitted in response to discovery requests.	
 Berkeley Women's Shelter, Berkeley, CA	 Summer 2000
Counselor	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Counseled battered women on legal rights and available community resources.● Referred clients to other agencies for services.	

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Berkeley Women's Shelter, Berkeley, CA	1998 - 2000
Volunteer Intake Coordinator	
 Suicide Prevention Center, Berkeley, CA	 1997
Hotline Volunteer	

INTERESTS AND SKILLS

Fluent in written and spoken Spanish. Enjoy foreign travel, cooking and playing piano.