Guide to Careers in Public Interest Law

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Most every law student has some awareness of the “public interest option,” meaning the career path which doesn’t end in law firms or corporations. Beyond this basic understanding, many students are hard-pressed to articulate a clear and comprehensive statement of what exactly constitutes public interest work. Thus, many students are unaware and unfamiliar with the diverse and professionally rewarding opportunities available in a public interest career.

Defined broadly, public interest employment encompasses public service orientated work on behalf of individuals and causes that otherwise lack meaningful representation in the legal system. Under the umbrella of this expansive definition are innumerable opportunities that boast diversity in political ideology, purpose, substantive law and forms of advocacy.

The Forms of Advocacy
Public interest advocacy is quite diverse and includes:
- Client-orientated, direct service case work and litigation, both civil and criminal;
- Policy-orientated class action and impact litigation;
- Policy-making legislative and regulatory reform on the federal, state and local levels of government;
- Lobbying and “watchdog” activity on behalf of law reform organizations;
- Community organizing and education;
- Alternative dispute resolution; and
- Innovative entrepreneurial advocacy.

The Substance of Advocacy
Substantively, public interest work ranges from civil law to criminal law, from family law disputes and estate preparation to constitutional reform and international humanity efforts.

The Appeal of the Work
The eclectic nature of public interest work invites individuals with varying goals, interests and values to pursue careers in the public interest sector and allows them to find the work satisfying both professionally and personally.

Reasons often cited for the appeal of this work are the opportunities to pursue individual or group concepts of justice and equality, the ability to assist in advancement for the public good rather than commercial or personal gain and the less noble but still relevant reason—the absence of billable hours.
Public interest practice takes place in legal service and law reform organizations and in agencies at all levels of government. It encompasses charities, educational and public international organizations, private public interest law firms (no, that’s not an oxymoron) and private law firms committed to and performing pro bono work.

**PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS**

Public interest organizations include nonprofit organizations that specialize in the problems of particular groups or issues. The nature of the advocacy varies dramatically depending in part on the organization’s substantive focus and its emphasis on advocating for individual clients—Client-orientated public interest organizations—or greater policy reform—Policy-orientated public interest organizations.

**Client-orientated organizations** are traditionally hands-on, privately run, nonprofit law offices that concentrate on representing individual clients. These organizations may specialize in areas such as housing and immigration law. The Migrant Farmworker Project of Legal Action of Wisconsin, which represents migrant farm workers throughout Wisconsin with respect to employment-related and public benefit issues, is an example of a client-orientated organization.

**Policy-orientated organizations** include: (1) public interest impact litigation organizations, and (2) social action organizations whose goals are to protect legal rights or to bring about social change in a particular area using broader legal strategies and forums.

(1) Public interest impact litigation organizations pursue impact and class action litigation which present significant legal questions and have potential to invoke systemic reform (e.g., The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund).

Conversely, (2) social action organizations focus on public policy and law reform with the goal of implementing change through means other than litigation. Activities may include legislative and administrative advocacy, community education and organization, research, policy analysis and filing amicus curiae briefs on issues relevant to the organization’s focus.

Many public interest organizations engage in both impact litigation and social action advocacy. The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin is an example of such an organization.

**LEGAL SERVICE OFFICES**

Legal service offices, such as legal aid societies, are non-profit community and neighborhood-based organizations that offer free or reduced-fee assistance to low-income persons. The substantive legal work of these offices typically includes issues of family, housing, health, government benefits, consumer protection and employment; however, some legal service offices also focus on law reform cases.

**PROSECUTING ATTORNEYS**

Prosecuting attorneys represent the government in the prosecution of criminal cases. Prosecuting attorneys are employed at local, state and federal levels of government. At local and state levels prosecuting attorneys work in district attorneys’ offices and in criminal divisions of state attorney general’s offices. At the federal level, prosecuting attorneys work both at the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington D.C. and at U.S. Attorneys’ Offices throughout the country.

**Local District Attorneys’ Offices** are organized by county with the District Attorney (DA) often being an elected position. Larger DA offices, such as Milwaukee County, have specialized units focusing on areas of narcotics, juvenile protection, domestic violence, appellate work, etc. Assistant District Attorneys (ADAs) have the opportunity to rapidly acquire comprehensive criminal trial experience.

**State Attorney Generals’ Offices** (AGs Office) investigate and prosecute cases of statewide significance. AG lawyers work closely with DA offices and other government agencies in areas such as organized and white collar crime, narcotics and criminal enforcement of environmental protection laws. Most AG’s offices maintain criminal appellate divisions that handle criminal appeals.

The **U.S. Department of Justice** and **U.S. Attorney’s Offices** share responsibilities for prosecuting federal crimes. The U.S. Department of Justice (otherwise known as “Main Justice,” “Justice Department,” or “DOJ”) is based in Washington, D.C. In addition to prosecuting individual cases in the areas of fraud, narcotics, organized crime, terrorism, immigration, tax, civil rights, anti-trust, etc., divisions of the DOJ provide logistical and
policy support to the U.S. Attorneys’ Offices, coordinate nationwide law enforcement initiatives and respond to other government agencies’ requests for information.

Each U.S. Attorney is appointed by, and reports to, the U.S. Attorney General, and each federal judicial district has at least one U.S. Attorney’s Office. The U.S. Attorneys’ Offices deal with issues such as drug enforcement, economic crime and organized crime and work closely with other federal government agencies, such as the FBI, Department of Labor, the IRS, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

PUBLIC DEFENDER OFFICES

Attorneys in federal, state and locally funded public defender offices serve as court-appointed counsel for indigent persons in criminal cases (think Sixth Amendment).

Public defenders are required to accept the cases referred to them by the courts irrespective of limited staff size and current caseload. This setting offers a fast-paced environment with a lot of courtroom exposure and experience.

OTHER GOVERNMENT OFFICES

Literally tens of thousands of attorneys are employed at a wide range of federal, state and local departments. The work of these attorneys is diverse in substance and form. Opportunities range from the FBI and U.S. Department of Labor on the federal level to the Wisconsin Department of Motor Vehicles on the state level, to corporation counsels at the county level, to city attorney positions, or in-house counsel at urban city agencies such as the City Child Welfare Agency at the local level.

PRIVATE LAW FIRMS

A relatively small but growing number of private law firms are now practicing in the area of public interest law, meaning the firms either work for underrepresented groups or specialize in issue-orientated work such as civil rights litigation, tenant advocacy, etc. These firms are known as “private public interest law firms.”

Many private law firms also take public interest cases on a pro bono basis. Some firms permit associates to apply a portion of their time spent on pro bono cases to their minimum billable hour requirement (e.g., 50 of the 75 hours worked on a pro bono file count toward the firm’s 2000-hour billable requirement).

Be realistic with this option. If you are committed to public interest work, a traditional large, corporate law firm is not going to permit you to focus your energies on such work. Billable hours and paying clients will dominate your days.

SO MANY CHOICES

If you are uncertain as to which public interest setting best fits your personal and professional goals, we recommend using your time during law school to explore several of the public interest practice settings through volunteer work, internships and clinical program placements. The skills gained in each setting complement all areas of public interest work and will assist you in building a fundamentally strong and interesting résumé.

Alternatives to Traditional Public Interest Lawyering

- Economic Development
- Alternative Dispute Resolution
- Nonprofit Management
- Foundation Work
- Labor Unions

International Public Interest Work is one of the fastest growing fields within the public sector.
PUBLIC INTEREST MYTHS DISPELLED

**MYTH NO. 1: You’re stuck.** (Once in public interest; always in public interest.)

You are not “stuck” in public interest work if that is where you elect to begin your legal career.

Many lawyers transition from public sector work to private sector work very successfully. Working for a public interest employer during your second summer and/or your first few years of practice will not inhibit you from ever joining the private sector. Recognize, however, that the longer you practice in either the private or public sector, the more difficult the transition will become (typically it is more difficult to transition after many years of experience).

**MYTH NO. 2: You lack skills.** (Public interest lawyers lack good lawyering skills.)

As a result of the inability of most public interest employers to hire training consultants, send young attorneys off to seminars and hold in-house training sessions during the workday, there is a misconception that public interest attorneys lack the skills of their colleagues at law firms.

While “formal” training may be sparse at public interest employers, young attorneys are presented the opportunity immediately to learn from on-the-job experiences. For example, a public interest attorney is more likely to learn the art of defending a deposition by actually having to defend one while a large firm attorney will learn these skills in a deposition training seminar. One method of training is not necessarily superior to the other.

In both settings, the greatest learning opportunity is to talk with and observe attorneys.

**MYTH NO. 3: You’re unemployable.** (The public interest job search is impossible.)

Like every job search, public interest job searches require you to be organized, focused and committed.

The burden is on you to actively and aggressively target employers with letters and résumés and to network with public interest attorneys.

The fact that you are still searching for employment late into the spring semester IS NOT cause for concern in the public interest arena.

The public interest job search takes time and energy and requires you to be proactive in your efforts, but finding a job that fits your personal and professional goals is a tremendous payback for your dedication to the job search.

**MYTH NO. 4. You’re Poor.** (You can not afford to live off of a public interest salary.)

Depending on your affinity for the finer things in life, this may be true; however, the reality is that public interest salaries are comparable to the starting salaries of many small firms in Wisconsin.

In addition to a salary that permits sustenance, public interest work offers professional satisfaction as a result of pursuing a cause to which you are committed, and although the hours can be long, they are not accompanied by the onus of billable hour requirements.

There are also loan repayment options for public interest lawyers that are discussed in greater detail on page 14 of this Guide.

**MYTH NO. 5: You’re a failure.** (Public interest is for the big-firm dropouts and rejects.)

Because of the relatively few public interest positions available in comparison to firm jobs, they are highly coveted and sought after positions with very successful, intelligent law students applying. Only those individuals equating salary to professional success conclude that public interest is second-tier employment. Public interest attorneys are highly regarded for their work and societal contributions.

...finding a job that fits your personal and professional goals is a tremendous payback for your dedication to your job search.

**Attorneys working in public interest jobs cite the intellectual challenges, autonomy, responsibility, and sense of accomplishment as reasons for job satisfaction.**

“I have not bought that Mercedes yet; I may never make $150,000 a year. On the other hand, I have not missed a loan payment, I eat like a pig; and damn, I’m happy. It is hard to believe that I wake up each morning and get paid for what I do.”

*Katina Ancar, Skadden Fellow at the National Center for Youth Law. Serving the Public: A Job Search Guide*
THE PUBLIC INTEREST CANDIDATE

Similar to private sector employers, academic performance and participation in journals, moot court, esteemed clinical programs and judicial clerkships are factors which appeal to public interest employers; however, unlike law firms, public interest employers tend to attribute equal or greater import to the following four factors:

**A Demonstrated Commitment to Public Interest Work.**

The causes and clients served by public interest work need attorneys that are passionate about the nature and purpose of their work. The résumé and experiences of a strong candidate will reflect a demonstrated interest and commitment to public interest work.

Working for Habitat for Humanity for a three-week period when your résumé and transcript otherwise reflect two summers at a large firm, a course stream of intellectual property and business law, and a publication entitled, “Mergers & Acquisitions of 2018” isn’t likely to assist you in selling your passion for public interest work.

A commitment to public interest work can be demonstrated by the following:

(1) Participate in Marquette’s clinical and internship programs;
(2) Join Marquette’s Pro Bono Society;
(3) Conduct research for a professor in areas of public interest;
(4) Publish an article on a public interest-related topic for a law school journal, law review or state bar or industry publication;
(5) Assume leadership positions in public interest-related organizations and extracurricular activities both at the law school and within the community and the state bar organizations;
(6) Volunteer/work for public interest organizations and causes, including non-legal work, and/or
(7) Enroll in law school courses which provide the skills necessary to be successful in the area you want to practice. If impact litigation is it for you; get trial advocacy and appellate advocacy courses on your transcript.

**An Ability To Work Well With Colleagues And Clients.**

Personal qualities are particularly important to public interest employers. Public interest employers want to hire someone who will work well with the entire staff and who has the compassion and empathy to interact with clients on legal issues that can be very personal and sensitive. Moreover, as a result of a greater common cause, public interest work cultures tend to have a stronger sense of community than traditional law firms.

**An Ability To Assume Responsibility Immediately.**

No, a district attorney is not going to give a first-year ADA a felony murder case the first day of work, but a new attorney may get a stack of misdemeanor files. Public interest employers are often times understaffed and therefore require new attorneys to immediately begin assuming responsibility for REAL legal work. Your ability to demonstrate creativity, initiative and confidence is important.

**A Final Comment on Grades & Journals.**

While public interest employers are often less provincial than large firms when looking at a candidate’s qualifications, that does not mean that public interest employers deem grades and journal participation irrelevant.

Grades are a component of your public interest job search. Unlike large firms, a high class rank may not be required, but public interest employers do want to hire successful candidates and will consider grades as one of several factors. Of particular interest to public interest employers is a candidate’s success in related coursework.

Similarly, unlike many law firms, public interest employers do not default into requiring law review or other journal participation. That said, certainly strong writing skills are important to public interest employers, and participating on a journal may permit you to edit and/or author articles that are of interest to you (and potentially to a prospective employer).

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Public interest employers want candidates with a demonstrated commitment to public interest work.

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Working for a variety of public interest employers has several benefits including helping you to:

1. Build a base of experience;
2. Establish a network of contacts; and
3. Demonstrate your commitment to public interest work generally and possibly in a particular area.
The PUBLIC INTEREST Job Search

Amazing job opportunities await you in public interest work and conducting a focused, professional job search will put you in the position to be adding one to your résumé!

Having said that, you need to know that securing a public interest position is not for the faint of heart, the perpetual procrastinator or the lackadaisical law student. You will encounter rejections; you can not postpone starting your search and you need to be ambitious and appropriately aggressive in the number and geographical location of employers you target.

Most public interest employers do not engage in extensive recruiting or informational campaigns. Having said that, there are three public interest career fairs that Marquette students may attend that do provide convenient access to employers: The Equal Justice Works Conference & Career Fair, The Wisconsin Public Interest Interview Program, and the Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS

As previously discussed in this Guide, the world of public interest law and employers is expansive and diverse.

With myriad possibilities, the first order of conducting an efficient and effective job search is to identify employers of interest. This is achieved in two steps:

1. Self Assessment, and
2. Research

Public interest work requires a good “fit” as a result of the nature of the work and clientele. Failure to assess your strengths, interests, values, political disposition, etc. prior to conducting a public interest job search will likely result in one of two consequences:

1. You finding yourself in an unsatisfying job.
2. You finding yourself without a job.

SELF ASSESSMENT

The CPC staff is available to assist you in identifying and clarifying your job search goals. If your prefer to engage in self assessment on your own, we encourage you to consider the following questions before starting your public interest job search:

- About what issues do I feel passionately?
- On behalf of what population(s) or causes would I like to work?
- What are my strengths? Weaknesses?
- What values are important to me?
- To what type of work am I drawn?
- At what do I feel most successful?
- What are my accomplishments?
- In what geographical area(s) am I willing to work and live?
- What are my minimum financial requirements?

By inviting an honest conversation with yourself during several points in your law school experience, you may discover that a small nonprofit law office, which provides legal services to the elderly, is really a better fit for you than the ACLU national lobbyist position.

RESEARCHING EMPLOYERS

Thorough research of potential employers is a critical step in the process of securing a position where you will find personal and professional satisfaction.

A cornucopia of resources are available to assist you in identifying potential employers.

The internet is an excellent resource, including the Law School’s Career Planning website, which provides links to many public interest websites and resources. Three notable online resources are:

1. www.PSJD.org
2. Government Honors and Internship Handbook, and
3. Public Policy Handbook

See Example Resources on p. 15 for the links to the Government Honors and Internship Handbook and the Public Policy Handbook. We also recommend searching individual employer web pages, clearinghouse sites for public interest employers, general search engines such as Google and the career centers at Westlaw and Lexis.

Beyond the internet, the CPC maintains PSJD’s The Comprehensive Fellowship Guide: The Ultimate Resource for Law Students and Lawyers, which is an outstanding resource, employer files, and employer evaluations as completed by current and former students. Other solid resources are nonprofit directories, and articles in journals and newspapers.

Information to look for when searching Public Interest Employers:

- The organization’s mission
- Areas of specialization
- Major accomplishments
- Size of the legal staff and attorney-background information
- Current concerns (staffing, funding, etc.)
- Your potential role within the office

Depending on the type of employer, you may also seek information on:

- Annual reports
- Organizational history
- Profiles of chief officers
- Size of organization (e.g., national vs. community nonprofit)
- Funding sources (e.g., foundation grants, federal funding)
- Fundraising activities (e.g., private or corporate)
We do recommend that any law student interested in a career in the public interest arena attend The Equal Justice Works Career Fair and Conference and/or the Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference (MPILCC).

Both events offer the following opportunities:
- On-site job interviews for full-time and summer positions
- Résumé collection
- Table talks
- Conference sessions
- Networking opportunities
- Résumé enhancement

Employers have three options for participation in the career fair component of these conferences: interview, résumé collect and table talk.

**Interviewing Employers**

Many employers will accept student résumés and application materials in advance of the conferences and arrange to interview students on-site during the conferences. The Equal Justice Works Conference requires students to send application materials directly to the employers via methods that are determined by each employer. The MPILCC uses Symplicity as the vehicle through which students submit application materials for interviewing employers.

**Résumé Collects**

Some employers forego accepting and reviewing résumés before the conference and instead collect résumés throughout the conference. In this instance, employers will contact students of interest sometime after the conference. Interviewing employers may also collect résumés on-site. Many employers collect résumés during table talk sessions.

**Table Talk**

Nearly all employers participate in the table talk component of the conferences. Employers electing this route are available to meet with students for short 5-10-minute conversations during designated conference times. Table talks are not by appointment, but are on a first-come first-serve basis. If you are interested in an employer and they are pre-screening résumés and interviewing as well as holding table talk sessions, it is definitely in your favor to submit your résumé in advance of the conference. Use the table talk time to target employers who are not interviewing at the conference.

(Side note: Students should wear interview attire to table talk sessions.)

**Networking Opportunities: Résumé Enhancer**

These conferences offer the opportunity to meet with and impress the who’s who list in the public interest world of legal services in both formal and informal settings. The ability for you as a student to shake hands and converse with attorneys doing what you hope to be doing is invaluable.

In addition to the personal connections that you will make, you are able to add your conference attendance to your résumé, which enhances the legitimacy of your commitment to public interest work.

**Wisconsin Public Interest Interview Program (WPIIP)**

Marquette Law School and UW Law School co-host a public interest interview program that is held every year in February. WPIIP requires students to apply in advance for interviews. WPIIP does not include table talks or a larger conference. It is exclusive to students attending Marquette and UW law schools. Typically, between 25-35 Wisconsin-based non-profit employers participate. Their focus is hiring summer interns.

Watch for emails beginning in December regarding registration and deadlines.

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**EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS CONFERENCE & CAREER FAIR**

The Equal Justice Works Career Fair and Conference is held in Washington, D.C. and is usually scheduled for late October. The Career Fair & Conference includes one-on-one interviews with public interest employers from across the nation, table talk group interviews, and educational sessions on how to advance a public interest career. All students are permitted to participate in the table talk and career development sessions. First year students, however, are not permitted to participate in the one-on-one interviews with employers. Student registration opens in mid-August.

**MIDWEST PUBLIC INTEREST LAW CAREER CONFERENCE (MPILCC)**

The Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference (MPILCC), sponsored by the Chicago Area Law School Consortium, is a job fair for students interested in employment in the public sector. The MPILCC typically attracts over 50 employers for on-site interviews, table talk and résumé collections. Usually approximately 300 students from 30 schools attend, with hundreds more submitting résumés to non-attending employers. Student registration is usually open from early-November through late-November with the conference being held in February.

Watch for emails from the CPC regarding student registration and deadlines!
Similar to any other legal résumé, the function of your public interest résumé is to sufficiently interest the prospective employer to invite you to an interview.

Your résumé must meet the “scan-test,” which is the less than 60 second first read that determines the initial fate of your candidacy—discard pile or interview pile. Your goal is to create a visually powerful marketing tool that sells your qualifications and commitment.

The CPC’s Legal Résumé Guide, which is available in the Career Planning Handbook and the CPC website (see Example Resources on p. 15 of this guide), is an excellent resource and should be consulted when constructing your public interest résumé.

There are, however, a few differences between a public interest résumé and a standard legal résumé, most of which concern the organization and presentation of information. Keep in mind that your résumé is NOT a static document. The format and content of your résumé may change slightly or significantly from employer to employer. To the extent possible, tailor your résumé to the specific employer (use the information you gain by conducting employer research) and the specific job (look to the job description or talk with other attorneys doing similar work). For example, if you are applying for a position with a very liberal organization, you may want to include your experience as a legislative intern, but de-emphasize the fact it was for the most staunchly conservative senator on the Hill. Also, keep in mind the general attributes a public interest employer is seeking in a candidate. (See, page 5 of this Guide).

You do not have to create separate sections for legal and nonlegal work.

If you have relevant skills in nonlegal settings, consider emphasizing them alongside of your legal skills. Public interest employers tend to focus less on the context of the employment and more on your transferable skills and responsibilities.

You may elect to include volunteer commitments under the “Experience” section of your résumé.

Traditional legal résumés often list volunteer and community activities separate from work experience as an afterthought at the bottom margin (and that’s only if there is room). On a public interest résumé, you want to emphasize your long-standing commitment to the public good, which is better accomplished by incorporating volunteer activities and work experience into a heading entitled “Experience” or “Public Interest Experience” appearing near the top of your résumé.

You should emphasize ALL of your public interest experience.

Public interest employers often look beyond arbitrary class rank cutoffs and focus more on relevant coursework, experience, and personal qualities. Your résumé should reflect this focus.

An example résumé is on page 9.

Cover letters are read, and they do matter. As a result of time commitment that frequently accompanies drafting a well-written cover letter, many students will themselves into believing that cover letters are merely the wrapping paper of the résumé—unlikely the focus and often discarded with little care.

On the contrary, cover letters are a powerful marketing tool that permit you to communicate your personality, enthusiasm for the employer and the position, and your professional strengths.

The CPC’s Writing Effective Letters guide, is an excellent source of information, and you should refer to it as you craft cover letters. It is located in the Career Planning Handbook and the CPC website.

An effective cover letter is employer-focused and employer-specific. This means that you have to (a) know the employer and what skills they are looking for in a candidate (e.g., do your research), and (b) know your qualifications well enough to compose a letter highlighting how your skills, experiences and goals “fit” the employer’s needs and qualifications. Both tasks require substantial time and thought.

The least effective cover letter reads as though countless employers’ names and addresses could be merged and mailed. Know that while mass mailing is never the recommended method, it is particularly ineffective with public interest employers.

Your letters must:

1. Demonstrate your abilities to identify with the employer’s clients,
2. Demonstrate your abilities to identify with the culture of the organization,
3. Demonstrate your commitment to the community in which the organization operates, and
4. Demonstrate your commitment to the organization’s cause and/or mission.

An example cover letter is on page 10.
The PUBLIC INTEREST Résumé Example

This résumé was submitted for a fellowship where the fellow would provide legal representation on behalf of juvenile defenders. Note the choice of wording for the experience section. This résumé was restructured for employers with a broader focus.

Tracey M. Woodley
1103 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201
414.288.6397 │ tracey.woodley@marquette.edu

EDUCATION

Marquette University Law School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Candidate for Juris Doctor, May 2022
Class Rank: Top 25%    GPA: 3.356/4.000
Honors: CALI Award (highest grade), Public Sector Labor Law (Spring 2020) and Introduction to Public Interest Law (Fall 2018)
Activities: MARQUETTE LAW REVIEW, Member
Public Interest Law Society, Secretary

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, May 2018
Honors: cum laude
Activities: Student Ambassador, Office of Alumni Affairs

JUVENILE AND PUBLIC INTEREST EXPERIENCE

Office of the State Public Defender, Milwaukee Juvenile and Mental Health, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin
Legal Intern, Summer 2021
Managed all aspects of litigation involving juvenile clients in Delinquency and Child in Need of Protection and Services cases under the Wisconsin Student Practice Rule. Represented clients in numerous court hearings including detention, plea, disposition, and a habeas corpus. Filed motions on behalf of clients and prepared for trials.

Federal Defender Services of Wisconsin, Inc., Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Legal Intern, Spring 2021
Conducted research and prepared office memorandum for staff attorneys. Observed numerous court proceedings, including sentencing hearings, jury trials, and oral arguments in front of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

Wisconsin State Public Defender’s Office, Trial Division, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Legal Intern, Summer 2020
Assisted in the representation of clients in criminal and revocation proceedings. Conducted research on topics ranging from probation extension to hearsay exceptions.

Dane County Juvenile Reception Center, Madison, Wisconsin
Juvenile Court Counselor, September 2018 - June 2019
Made short-term custody decisions for youthful offenders referred to the Reception Center by law enforcement, the courts, or Human Services. Counseled parents and youth.

Racine County Juvenile Detention Home, Racine, Wisconsin
Juvenile Court Worker, October 2017 - August 2018
Evaluated youth and submitted behavioral reports to the juvenile courts. Supervised detention residents. Created curriculum and taught the detention summer school program during the summer of 2017.

PERSONAL

Qualified for 2022 Boston Marathon
THE PUBLIC INTEREST COVER LETTER EXAMPLE

Tracey M. Woodley
1103 West Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53201
414.288.6397 │ tracey.woodley@marquette.edu

October 30, 2021

Dear Atty. Roloff:

I was inspired to be a public defender while watching my uncle, George Johnson, a former public defender for Hennepin County, defend his clients with enthusiasm, passion and a commitment to providing the best possible defense to individuals who could not afford legal representation. I share Atty. Johnson’s passion and commitment, and as a result, I directed my education and work experiences in ways that support my goal of working as a public defender. After my graduation from law school in May 2022, I hope that the culmination of my years of commitment and work will be a position with your office.

My experience, skills, coursework and understanding of the role and responsibilities of public defenders will permit me to serve your office and clients well. My experience includes internships with three Wisconsin Public Defender’s Offices and the Federal Defender for the Eastern District of Wisconsin. In addition to equipping me with a realistic understanding of the work and its demands, through the internships, I gained significant experience in three divisions, including felony, special victims and juvenile and mental health. I understand that your office has a need for attorneys with experience in these divisions. My internships also served to enhance my legal skills. In the summer of 2021, I was admitted to practice under the Wisconsin Supreme Court Student Practice Rule. As a result, I appeared and argued on behalf of numerous clients and carried a caseload of approximately 17 juvenile clients. I was given great autonomy and handled all aspects of the cases, which results in my ability to immediately assume cases with minimal oversight.

Finally, as previously mentioned, I selected coursework to strengthen my understanding of the criminal system and my ability to lawyer effectively. I completed and received honors grades in Criminal Process, The Constitution of Criminal Investigations, Juvenile Law, Sentencing, and Trial Advocacy. The combination of my commitment to the work your office does and my experiences, skills and education provides me with the confidence, poise and motivation necessary to advocate effectively for clients represented by the Minnesota State Public Defender.

Included for your review is my résumé. I look forward to the opportunity to meet with you. If you have any questions, please contact me at the above-provided telephone and email address. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

/s/ Tracy M. Woodley

Tracy M. Woodley

Enclosure

Note that this letter does not start with the often used default, “I am a third-year law student at Marquette University Law School.” We encourage you to begin your letters in a manner that will better capture the attention of the reader.

Also, if the employer has no history of employing/recruiting Marquette graduates, naming Marquette in the first paragraph may not be your best strategy.

This is a strong topic sentence that mentions several areas the paragraph will touch upon. Make certain your paragraphs support your topic sentences.

Throughout the letter, connect your qualifications to the employer’s needs.

Add specific examples to support general statements like, “My internships enhanced my legal skills.”

Always connect how your experiences will benefit the employer. It is not enough to provide a laundry list of what you have done. You must indicate how it translates into what you can do.
THE PUBLIC INTEREST INTERVIEW

Public interest employers give tremendous consideration to a candidate’s perceived character, depth of commitment to the employer’s field and ability to assimilate well into the office culture.

If you want the job, you must interview well. Keep in mind that if you secured the interview, the employer has already determined that you are qualified on paper. The interview is an opportunity for both you and the employer to explore fit and motivations.

No matter the form or number of questions asked, an interviewer is seeking responses to the following two questions:

“Why do you want to work for us?”

“Why should we hire you?”

In order to answer both of these questions effectively, you must spend a considerable amount of time preparing. We encourage you to consider the below-provided categories of questions as listed in a former publication, *Harvard Law School: Public Interest Job Search Guide*.

We also recommend you read the CPC’s *Interviewing Guide*, which is located in the *Career Planning Handbook* and online on the CPC website (see Example Resources on p. 15). Finally, we encourage all students to participate in a mock interview with a CPC staff member and/or to take advantage of the CPC’s Alumni Mock Interview Program.

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**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

The following questions are intended to serve as a catalyst to assist you in defining and articulating your strengths, weaknesses and motivations for pursuing a particular career path. When used as an introspective exercise, you will be prepared to articulate a confident, on-point response to nearly any interview question. Students should not memorize or rehearse responses. Doing so may be fatal to your job search with possible side effects including responses that are rote, lacking in genuine enthusiasm and not responsive to the questions being asked by the interviewer.

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<tr>
<th>PERSONAL</th>
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<tr>
<td>What is your greatest strength/weakness?</td>
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<td>How would you describe yourself as a person?</td>
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<td>What is the most difficult/rewarding thing you’ve ever accomplished? What skills assisted you?</td>
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<td>What is important to you in life?</td>
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<td>Are you a team player, or do you prefer to work on your own?</td>
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<td>What is your idea of success?</td>
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<tr>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
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<td>Why did you go to law school? Have your goals changed since then?</td>
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<td>What courses in law school did you enjoy most/least? Why?</td>
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<td>Who is your favorite professor? Why?</td>
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<td>Why did you choose your undergraduate major?</td>
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<td>In what extracurricular activities have you participated?</td>
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<th>WORK EXPERIENCE/SKILLS</th>
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<td>What type of responsibilities have you had in prior work experiences?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What did you particularly like/dislike about that work?</td>
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<td>What tasks are you especially strong/weak at doing?</td>
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<td>What major problem did you encounter on a past job, and how did you handle it? What does this say about you?</td>
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<th>CAREER GOALS</th>
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<td>What are your short/long term career goals?</td>
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<td>How are you planning to achieve these goals?</td>
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<td>What two or three things are most important to you in a job?</td>
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<td>What kind of training/supervision do you want?</td>
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<td>How would you describe your ideal job?</td>
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<td>Where do you see yourself five/ten years from now?</td>
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<th>JOB SPECIFIC</th>
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<td>Why the specific office/organization?</td>
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<td>Why are you looking at a particular specialization?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What qualifications do you have that will make you successful in the position for which you applied?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why should the employer select you over all the other candidates?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What would the greatest drawback of this job be for you?</td>
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Being prepared permits you to:

- Exude self-confidence
- Provide responsive answers
- Ask intelligent, thoughtful questions
- Engage in meaningful discussion.
THE PUBLIC INTEREST INTERVIEW Preparing to ask questions.

The goal of the interview is to have a conversation where both you and the employer are exploring compatibility. It is your responsibility to ask thoughtful questions that elicit information from the interviewer that is not available from published or online material.

Your objective in asking questions is to get information that will help you determine whether the job will be a good match for you and to also demonstrate a genuine interest in the employer.

Employers really do want to hire people who want to work for them. An effective means of demonstrating sincere interest is by asking insightful, thoughtful questions about the employer and/or the interviewer. Employers want to feel as though the person they are hiring is committed to finding a good fit and will therefore be committed to staying long-term if that is an option.

Candidates that ask only questions regarding the interview process, (e.g., when do you expect to notify people, how many people will you call back for second interviews, etc.), appear interested in getting a job but unconcerned about the particular employer.

Solid questions include inquiries about what your experience will be as an employee, what the short-term and long-term goals of the employer are, the employer’s commitment to developing your legal skills, experiences specific to the interviewer, etc.

Opportunities often arise throughout an interview for the interviewee to ask questions of the interviewer. A good interviewee will take advantage of these moments. By intermingling your questions with those of the interviewer, the tempo of the interview will become more conversational. The upside of this is that it is a more comfortable exchange for both parties which promotes rapport.

Prior to interviewing you should be aware of and be able to articulate the following information about yourself:

- Interests
- Relevant Experience
- Strengths & Weaknesses
- Skills
- Values
- Accomplishments
- Short and long term goals and plans to achieve them
- Work style & work preferences
- Geographic considerations

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO ASK THE EMPLOYER
The below questions are presented as ideas which should be customized to your specific interview.

- Tell me about how you came to work here? (Example of how to make it more specific: I understand you were a summer intern with this organization, is it common that the organization hires full-time staff out of the summer intern program?)
- On what kinds of cases or issues are you currently working?
- How much direction/autonomy is there in this position?
- What are your expectations for the person hired into this position?
- What does this organization perceive to be its greatest challenges for the coming year?
- What have people who worked here gone on to do? (Only appropriate for temporary positions, e.g., fellowships.)
- What aspect of your work do you find most professionally rewarding?
- What personal attributes are required in order to do this type of work well?
- In what ways, if any, has the direction or type of legal services you offer or the clientele to whom you offer it changed in recent years?

Thoughtful and pertinent questions convey interest in a position, so take advantage of the opportunity to ask questions.
PUBLIC INTEREST Funding Summer

The value of a summer spent working in the arena of public interest law is tremendous for law students’ professional development and personal growth. The disadvantage of summer public interest positions is that most of the them are volunteer, which often conflicts with mounting student loan commitments.

Fortunately, there are sources to which you can turn to support summer public interest work.

Public Interest Law Society (PILS) Summer Fellowship Program

One source of funding is close to home. Marquette Public Interest Law Society sponsors a Summer Fellowship Program (the Program). The Program awards stipends to law students pursuing jobs in the public interest sector that do not or can not provide compensation. The Program stipends are $4,800 for students working at least 35 hours per week for 10 weeks. (Stipends vary slightly each year contingent on fundraising successes of PILS and the number of fellows supported.) The number of awards given is determined on an annual basis. Applications are typically due at the beginning of March. For more information, visit https://law.marquette.edu/community/apply-pils-fellowship.

The Rural Summer Legal Corps

The Rural Summer Legal Corps is an Equal Justice Works Program funded by AmeriCorps that provides 30 law students with the opportunity to earn a $5000 stipend for spending the summer in a qualifying internship. Selected participants will begin the summer with intensive training from poverty law experts on housing, domestic violence, public benefits, migrant farmworkers, Native American, and family law. After the training, the law students will return directly to their host site to continue their 8-10 week placement.

AmeriCorps JD

The Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps JD program provides law students with the opportunity to deliver critically needed legal assistance in low-income and underserved communities across the country. In order to be eligible for AmeriCorps JD, a student must have secured a placement with a qualifying host organization prior to submitting an application for funding.

John J. Curtin, Jr. Fellowship

The John J. Curtin, Jr. Fellowship program is managed jointly by the ABA Commission on Homelessness and Poverty and the Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants. The Program pays $3,500 stipends to three students who spend the summer months working for nonprofit organizations which have programs dedicated to meeting the legal needs and concerns of homeless and indigent people and their advocates, with preferences given to bar association and legal services programs.

The Legal Internship Program aims both to help homeless clients and to encourage careers in the law that further the goals of social justice.

Students are required to find their own eligible internship. All law students are eligible. For further information see the Curtin Justice Fund website at https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/homelessness_poverty/john_j_curtin_jr_fellowship1/. Applications are usually due by the end of March.

Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI)

For students interested in working in Chicago, this is a great opportunity to work in public interest law. The PILI grants stipends to law students who work at one of the PILI-affiliated public interest agencies in Chicago. The areas of law available include civil rights, immigration, poverty law, health law, and environmental law. Law students apply to the agencies directly through the PILI application. The application process opens on November 1. Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis until all agencies have completed their hiring, usually by late March. Many agencies want to interview and hire before March -- so the earlier you apply, the better. For an application see the PILI website at http://pili.org/internships.

Earning Credit

It’s not money, but credits are nice as well! Many of the clinics and supervised fieldwork programs offered in the Law School’s upper–level curriculum, provide access to outstanding legal opportunities with nonprofit organizations and government agencies. Students do not receive pay but do earn academic credit. Clinics and supervised field work placements are excellent additions to a legal résumé and also present significant opportunity to build relationships with local attorneys and organizations.
Fellowships, federal honors programs, and Marquette University Law School’s Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) are sources of funding and opportunities for graduating law students seeking entry-level public service opportunities.

**Defining Fellowships**

A fellowship involves being awarded a specified sum of money after law school graduation for a fixed time period (usually 1-2 years) to fulfill a fairly specific purpose in a public interest setting. In other words—you get a cash stipend to take on a public interest-focused position. Many fellowships offer benefit packages as well.

Fellowships are very prestigious and are therefore fantastic avenues to lay the foundation for a future full-time entry-level public interest job.

While there are hundreds of fellowship opportunities, they typically fall within three categories: (1) organization-based fellowships where fellows receive a stipend for working within the host organization, (2) project-based fellowships that allow applicants to develop their own specific project in conjunction with a sponsoring non-profit organization of the applicants' choice (e.g., Equal Justice Works Fellowship, Skadden Fellowship), and (3) academic fellowships that provide the opportunity to earn an advanced law degree, such as an LL.M. or conduct focused research.

**Noteworthy Fellowships**

Two noteworthy Fellowships include the Equal Justice Works Fellowship (EJW) (http://www.equaljusticeworks.org) and the Skadden Fellowship (http://www.skaddenfellowships.org/).

These fellowships require the applicant to identify a host organization and to create a project proposal. Host organizations are typically nonprofits with 501(c)3 status. It is up to the applicant (that would be you) to identify and meet with a potential host organization, to identify a need within the services of the organization and to create a project proposal that will provide a service unique to the organization (e.g., most fellowships will not fund regular staff positions at nonprofit organizations).

Both the EJW and Skadden Fellowships have early fall deadlines for 3L applicants. The process of developing a proposal and identifying a host organization should begin during your second year of law school.

**Defining Federal Honors Programs**

**Federal Honors Positions** are paid 1–2 year positions with federal government agencies and include federal benefits. Federal Honors Programs are often the best route for recent law school graduates to gain immediate employment as attorneys for federal government agencies. Honors Program positions frequently result in permanent employment. The programs are very prestigious and, as a result, competitive.

For a comprehensive listing of these opportunities students may visit the Government Honors and Internship Handbook (password protected access via http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/marquette).

**Resources for Locating and Researching Fellowships, Honors Programs & Funding**

The following resources are recommended:

- **PSJD**, an online clearinghouse for law students and lawyers to connect with public interest job listings and career-building resources (free registration for MULS students at www.psjd.org)
- **Government Honors & Internship Handbook** (access available at http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/marquette)

If after reviewing these resources, you are interested in developing an application, we encourage you to make an appointment with the CPC staff.

Applications take a great deal of time to prepare and can not be done at the last minute. If you are pursuing a project-based fellowship where you are required to develop a proposed project, the process can take months and will require an ongoing, well-established relationship with a nonprofit organization. Students need to begin their research and application process early.

**Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program**

The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 established the PSLF Program. The PSLF Program provides for loan forgiveness for individuals employed in public service. To be eligible for public service loan forgiveness, the borrower must satisfy the following: 1. The loans are Federal Direct Loans, 2. The borrower is employed full-time in a public service job, and 3. The borrower makes qualifying monthly loan payments for 10 years (120 payments). For more information about the PSLF Program, arrange to meet with a financial aid representative from Marquette’s Financial Aid Office.

**The Loan Repayment Assistance Program**

The Eisenberg Loan Repayment Assistance Program provides direct financial assistance to qualifying Marquette University Law School graduates who enter public interest careers. For detailed LRAP information, visit the LRAP web page at https://law.marquette.edu/community/howard-and-phyllis-eisenberg-fund-loan-repayment-assistance-program.
Public Interest **Example Resources**

**PUBLICATIONS:**

- *Marquette University Law School Pro Bono Opportunities.* An excellent means to developing a public-interested focused résumé includes volunteering with one or more of Marquette Law School’s pro bono clinics. A list of the most recent opportunities, including descriptions of the various clinic activities is available at [https://law.marquette.edu/assets/community/pdf/pro-bono-projects-brochure.pdf](https://law.marquette.edu/assets/community/pdf/pro-bono-projects-brochure.pdf).

**WEBSITES**

The Career Planning Center has compiled a list of public interest-focused webpages. You may access this list online at the following webpage: [https://law.marquette.edu/career-planning/public-interest-and-pro-bono](https://law.marquette.edu/career-planning/public-interest-and-pro-bono).