



Career Planning Center

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Guide to Careers in Public Interest Law



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I. DEFINING THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC INTEREST LAW

Most law students are aware of the “public interest option” as a career path that focuses on the welfare or well-being of the general public and includes non-profit organizations and law firms and government agencies. Beyond this basic understanding, often students are unable to articulate a clear and comprehensive statement of the options available for someone pursuing a public interest career. This guide is in part meant to introduce students to the diverse and professionally rewarding opportunities available in a public interest career.

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

Substantively, public interest work touches nearly every area of practice, including civil law, criminal law, family law disputes, estate preparation, constitutional reform, and international humanity efforts. 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 this work's appeal are the opportunities to pursue individual or group concepts of justice and equality and the ability to assist in advancement for the public good rather than for commercial or personal gain.

Public interest advocacy is diverse and includes:

- Client-oriented, direct service case work and litigation (both civil and criminal)
- Policy-oriented 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
- Innovative entrepreneurial advocacy

II. DIVERSE IN PRACTICE AREAS AND SETTINGS

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, and private law firms committed to and performing *pro bono* work.

Public interest advocacy varies dramatically depending in part on the organization’s substantive focus and its emphasis on advocating for individual clients—client-oriented public interest organizations—or greater policy reform—policy-oriented public interest organizations.

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.


A. Client-oriented Organizations

Client-oriented organizations are traditionally hands-on, nonprofit law offices that concentrate on representing individual clients. These organizations might specialize in areas like housing and immigration law. Civitas Law Group and Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee are two examples of private, non-profit firms, which are mostly funded through private funding, not government.

B. Policy-oriented Organizations

Policy-oriented 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. The Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL) is an example of a policy-oriented organization.

Public interest impact litigation organizations pursue impact and class action litigation that present significant legal questions and have potential to invoke systemic reform (e.g., The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund). Conversely, 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 curie 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 (ACLU) is an example of such an organization.



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.

C. Legal Service Organizations

Legal service organizations 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 organizations typically includes issues of family, housing, health, government benefits, consumer protection, and employment; however, some legal service offices also focus on law reform cases.

D. Prosecuting Attorneys' Offices

Prosecuting attorneys represent the government in the prosecution of criminal and in some instances civil 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 (city, village, municipality): These local offices oversee prosecution of city ordinance violations, among many other things.

County District Attorneys' Offices prosecute criminal charges and are organized by county in Wisconsin. The District Attorney (DA) is an elected position. This is not necessarily the same structure in every state. 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) can rapidly acquire comprehensive criminal trial experience.

State Attorney Generals' Offices (AGs Office) investigate and prosecute criminal and civil 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, consumer fraud, and criminal enforcement of environmental protection laws. Most AG's offices maintain criminal appellate divisions that oversee criminal appeals.

On the federal level, U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Attorneys' 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 federal 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.

E. Public Defender Offices

Attorneys in federal, state, and locally funded public defender offices serve as court-appointed counsel for under-resourced persons in criminal cases per the U.S. Constitution. 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. In Wisconsin, the Public Defender is a state-level agency with offices throughout Wisconsin. In other states, the public defender offices may be organized by county or city. Knowing the organizational structure is important when applying for positions.

F. Other Government Offices

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.

The federal government employs over 35,000 attorneys. The DOJ has over 10,000 attorneys.

G. Private Law Firms

A small but growing number of private law firms are now practicing public interest law, meaning the firms either work for underrepresented groups or specialize in issue-oriented 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 public interest cases. Billable hours and paying clients will dominate your days.

III. PUBLIC INTEREST MYTHS DISPELLED

A. MYTH NO. 1: 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 with remarkable success. Working for a

public interest employer during your second summer and/or your first few years of practice will not inhibit you from joining the private sector. Also, because most public interest employers have young attorneys engaged in meaningful work with significant responsibilities, you are likely to have experiences that compare favorably to peers who started in traditional law firms.

B. MYTH NO. 2: Training is not available.

Public interest attorneys have terrific opportunities early in their careers to hone their skills. It is a misconception that the absence of formalized training programs that exist at larger firms results in public interest and smaller firm attorneys lagging in skill development. While “formal” training may be more limited, young attorneys are presented opportunities more 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 having to defend one while a large firm attorney will learn these skills in a deposition training seminar. Moreover, because public interest employers aren’t focused on generating revenue through billing time, the lawyers at public interest organizations can learn from shadowing experienced colleagues. One method of training is not superior to the other. In both settings, the greatest learning opportunity is to take advantage of all opportunities—formal and informal—to form professionally.

C. MYTH NO. 3: The public interest job search is challenging.

Like every job search, public interest job searches require you to implement a strategic plan that is thoughtfully designed and proactive. Regardless of employer type, the responsibility is always the job seekers to target employers actively and aggressively with letters and résumés and to build and nurture relationships with attorneys. The fact that you are still searching for summer or post-graduate employment late into spring semester **IS NOT** cause for concern in the public interest arena as these employers like smaller law firms hire based on need, not on seasonal schedules like corporate law firms.

D. MYTH NO. 4. Public interest salaries are low.

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. Moreover, the absence of tracking billable hours and productivity is a notable quality-of-life factor. There are also loan repayment options for public interest lawyers discussed in greater detail on page 16 of this guide. Finally, many government and nonprofit organizations offer employment benefits like time off and health care plans that are superior to what are offered by for-profit law firms.

E. MYTH NO 5: Public interest positions are not competitive.

High-achieving lawyers and law students populate every corner of public interest practice. Public interest law practice is a rewarding career choice where intelligent, competent lawyers thrive; it is not a fallback option. Contingent on the employer and nature of the work, public interest law can be highly sophisticated with positions being incredibly competitive.

IV. THE PUBLIC INTEREST CANDIDATE

Public interest employers value many of the same attributes in candidates as traditional law firms. Academic performance, participation in journals, moot court, esteemed clinical programs, judicial clerkships, practical legal skills, and leadership roles are factors that appeal to public interest employers. Unlike most law firms, public interest employers tend to attribute equal or greater import to the following four factors:

A. A Demonstrated Commitment to Public Interest Work

The causes and clients served in the public interest arena need attorneys who are passionate about the nature and purpose of their work. The résumé and experiences of a strong candidate will reflect a demonstrated 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 and Acquisitions of 2023,” isn’t likely to assist you in selling your passion for public interest work.

B. An Ability to Collaborate Well with Colleagues and Clients

Personality and work style are particularly important to public interest employers. Public interest employers place value on hiring individuals who will collaborate well with the entire staff and who have the compassion and empathy to interact with clients on legal issues that can be personal and sensitive. Public interest work cultures tend to have a stronger sense of community than traditional law firms due to having a mission-driven common cause. Demonstrating a collaborative, team-first mentality is important for people applying to public interest organizations.

C. An Ability to Assume Responsibility Immediately

Public interest employers are often staffed with smaller teams, so new attorneys are needed to onramp quickly. Being self-directed and demonstrating the initiative to learn and utilize resources are critical competencies that you should discuss during interviews.

D. A Final Comment on Grades and Journals

Grades are a component of your public interest job search. Public interest employers do want to hire successful candidates and will consider grades as one of several factors that indicate success. A candidate’s success in related coursework is of interest to public interest employers.

Also, while public interest employers may not require law review or other journal participation, writing skills are important to public interest employers. Membership on an academic journal may permit you to edit and/or author articles that are of interest to you (and potentially to a prospective employer).

Demonstrate Commitment

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

- Participate in Marquette’s clinical and internship programs.
- Volunteer 50 or more hours at one or more of Marquette’s pro bono opportunities and earn a pro bono honors cord.
- Conduct research for a professor in areas of public interest.
- Publish an article on a public interest-related topic for a law school journal, law review, or state bar or industry publication.
- 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.
- Volunteer/work for public interest organizations and causes, including non-legal work.
- Enroll in law school courses that provide the skills necessary to be successful in the area you want to practice. For example, if impact litigation is your focus, populate your transcript with trial advocacy and appellate advocacy courses.

V. 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 add an opportunity to your résumé. Having said that, you need to know that securing a public interest position requires assessment, strategy, and proactive activity. Like in every job search, you will likely encounter rejections, you need to build relationships in your target community, and you need to be ambitious and appropriately aggressive in the number and geographical location of employers you target.

As a candidate, you have the responsibility to conduct a proactive job search that includes identifying good-fit employers.

Like smaller law firms, some public interest employers do not have the staff to conduct extensive recruitment and outreach efforts, so as a candidate you carry the responsibility to identify and contact employers of interest. There are, however, three public interest career fairs that Marquette students may attend that do provide convenient access to employers: The Equal Justice Works Conference & Career Fair (EJW), The Wisconsin Public Interest Interview Program (WPIIP), and the Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference (MPILCC).

A. Identify Potential Employers

As previously discussed in this guide, the world of public interest law and employers is expansive and diverse. The unique nature of the work and clientele in public interest practice requires a good fit between work and candidate. With numerous possibilities, the first order of conducting an efficient and effective job search is to identify employers of interest in the markets you're targeting. This is achieved through self-assessment and research.

Self-Assessment. Failure to assess your strengths, interests, values, political disposition, etc. prior to conducting a public interest job search will result in one of two consequences—you find yourself in an unsatisfying job or you find yourself without a job. 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. The CPC staff can help you identify and clarify your job search goals. If you 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?

Research 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 is 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) the *Government Honors and Internship Handbook*, and (3) *The Public Policy Handbook*. See Resources on p. 17 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.

B. Career Fairs and Recruitment Programs

We do recommend that law students interested in a career in the public interest arena attend The Equal Justice Works Career Fair and Conference and the Midwest Public Interest Law Career Conference (MPILCC).

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.

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.

Both events offer the following opportunities: on-site job interviews for full-time and summer positions, résumé collections, table talks, conference sessions, networking opportunities, and résumé enhancement. Employers have three options for participation in the career fair component of these conferences: interviewing students, collecting student résumés, and inviting table talks, which are walk-up conversations.

C. 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 determined by each employer. The MPILCC uses Symplicity as the vehicle through which students submit application materials for interviewing employers.

D. Résumé Collects

Some employers elect not to accept and review résumés before the conference and instead collect hard copy résumés during 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.

E. Table Talk

Many 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 served basis. If you are interested in an employer and they are prescreening résumés and interviewing as well as holding table talk sessions, it is to your advantage to submit your résumé in advance of the conference. Use the table talk time to target employers who are not interviewing at the conference.

F. Networking Opportunities

These conferences offer the chance to meet with and impress decision makers in the public interest world of legal services in 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.

G. Wisconsin Public Interest Interview Program (WPIIP)

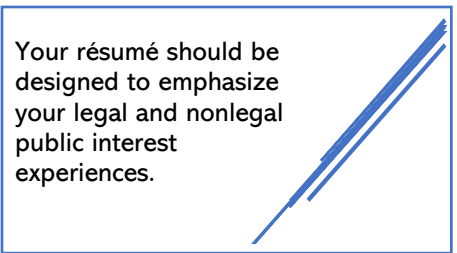
Marquette Law School and UW Law School co-host a public interest interview program that is held every year in February. WPIIP requires students to apply in advance for interviews. WPIIP does not include table talks or a larger conference forum. It is exclusive to students attending Marquette and UW law schools. Typically, between 30-40 Wisconsin-based, non-profit employers participate. The focus of most employers is hiring summer interns. Watch for emails beginning in December regarding registration and deadlines. Many of these positions are funded through the Public Interest Law Society's Summer Fellowship Program.

VI. HIGHLIGHTING PUBLIC INTEREST ON YOUR LEGAL RÉSUMÉ

Like any other legal résumé, the two functions of your public interest résumé are to interest the prospective employer to invite you to an interview and to serve as a basis for questions during an interview. 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 Resources on p. 17 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 depending on the receiving 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 at 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 pages 4-5 of this guide).



Your résumé should be designed to emphasize your legal and nonlegal public interest experiences.

You do not have to separate sections for legal and non-legal work. If you have relevant skills in non-legal settings, consider emphasizing these experiences in a section heading that captures all your public interest work—legal and nonlegal. Public interest employers tend to focus less on the context of the employment

and more on your transferable skills and responsibilities.

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. As noted previously, public interest employers often look beyond academic performance and focus more on relevant experience, activities, and personal qualities. Your résumé should reflect this focus. An example résumé is on page 10.

EXAMPLE PUBLIC INTEREST RÉSUMÉ

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.

Tracey M. Woodley

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

414.288.6397 | tracey.woodley@marquette.edu

EDUCATION

Marquette University Law School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Candidate for Juris Doctor, May 2025

Class Rank: Top 25% GPA: 3.356/4.000

- Honors: CALI Award (highest grade), Public Sector Labor Law (Spring 2023) and Introduction to Public Interest Law (Fall 2023)
- Journal: MARQUETTE BENEFITS & SOCIAL WELFARE LAW REVIEW, Member
- Activities: Public Interest Law Society, Secretary
Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair, Attendee (2024, 2023)

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, cum laude, May 2020

- 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 2024

- 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 2024

- 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 2023

- 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 2021 - June 2022

- 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 2020 - August 2021

- 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 2020.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Language Skills: Fluent in Spanish

Interests: Homebrewing, exploring Wisconsin's parks, and Wordle

VII. THE PUBLIC INTEREST COVER LETTER

Cover letters matter: they are not merely the wrapping paper of a résumé that is ignored and discarded. Legal employers—including public interest employers—use cover letters to assess the candidate’s interest in the opportunity and the candidate’s writing skills. When written well, cover letters are powerful marketing tools 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 write cover letters. The guide is in the *Career Planning Handbook* and on the [CPC website](#).

An effective cover letter is employer-focused and employer-specific. This requires you to know the employer and what skills they are looking for in a candidate (*i.e.*, research). You also need to know your qualifications well enough to compose a letter highlighting how your skills, experiences, and goals “fit” the employer’s needs and qualifications (*i.e.*, self-assessment). Know that while mass production of letters where you only change recipient and employer names is never appropriate, it is particularly fatalistic with public interest employers who care deeply about hiring candidates committed its mission. An example cover letter is on page 12.

Consider how you can achieve the following objectives when drafting cover letters to public interest employers:

- Demonstrate your abilities to respect and establish rapport with the employer’s clients.
- Demonstrate your abilities to identify with the work culture of the organization.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the community in which the organization operates.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the organization’s cause and/or mission.
- Demonstrate your abilities to be self-directed and autonomous in your work.

EXAMPLE COVER LETTER EXAMPLE

Tracey M. Woodley
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
414.288.6397 | tracey.woodley@marquette.edu

October 30, 2024

Attorney Cheryl Roloff
Minnesota State Public Defender, Hennepin County
315 N. Henry St., 2nd Floor
Minneapolis, MN 43210

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 2025**, I hope that the culmination of my years of commitment and work will be a position with your office.

The uncle is referenced because he is a former attorney with the recipient employer. The author of this letter would not use this reference with other employers.

Note that this letter does not start with the often-used default, “I am a third-year law student at Marquette University Law School.” You should start your letters with an energetic sentence that makes the reader want to know more.

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

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 extensive 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 2023, 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 managed all aspects of the cases, which results in my ability to immediately assume cases with minimal oversight.**

This is a strong topic sentence that mentions several areas the paragraph will touch upon. Make certain your paragraph development aligns with your topic sentence.

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

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. **My commitment to defense work and my experiences, skills, and education provide me with the confidence, poise, and motivation necessary to advocate effectively for clients represented by the Minnesota State Public Defender.**

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

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.

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

Sincerely,

/s/ Tracy M. Woodley

Tracy M. Woodley

VIII. THE PUBLIC INTEREST INTERVIEW

A. Preparing to Answer Questions

Public interest employers consider a candidate's perceived character, depth of commitment to the employer's work and mission, 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?"** and **"Why should we hire you?"**

We strongly recommend you review the CPC's [Interviewing Guide](#), which is located in the *Career Planning Handbook* and online on the [CPC website](#) (see Example Resources on p. 18). You should also take advantage of the CPC's one-on-one interview preparation sessions and mock interview sessions.

INTERVIEW GUIDE – PREPARE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

The following questions are intended to serve as a catalyst to assist you in defining and articulating your strengths 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. Do not memorize or over rehearse responses. Being too scripted may leave the impression that you lack genuine enthusiasm for the position.

PERSONAL

- What is your greatest strength/weakness?
- How would you describe yourself as a person?
- What is the most difficult/rewarding thing you've ever accomplished? What skills assisted you?
- What is important to you in life?
- Are you a collaborator, or do you prefer to work on your own?
- What is your idea of success?
- What have you done that shows initiative and creativity?
- Are you a self-starter, or do you prefer guidance on projects?
- How do you work under pressure?
- How strong are your writing skills?

CAREER GOALS

- What are your short/long term career goals?
- How are you planning to achieve these goals?
- What two or three things are most important to you in a job?
- What kind of training/supervision do you want?
- How would you describe your ideal job?
- Where do you see yourself five/ten years from now?

EDUCATION

- Why did you go to law school? Have your goals changed since then?
- What courses in law school did you enjoy most/least? Why?
- Who is your favorite professor? Why?
- Why did you choose your undergraduate major?
- In what extracurricular activities have you participated?

JOB SPECIFIC

- What type of responsibilities have you had in prior work experiences?
- What did you particularly like/dislike about that work?
- What tasks are you especially strong/weak at doing?
- What major problem did you encounter on a past job, and how did you manage it? What does this say about you?
- Why the specific office/organization?
- Why are you looking at a particular specialization?
- What qualifications do you have that will make you successful in the position for which you applied?
- Why should the employer select you over all the other candidates?
- What would the greatest drawback of this job be for you?

B. 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 from the interviewer information not available from published or online material. Your objectives in asking questions are 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 who 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** (any job) and less interested in fit.

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.

INTERVIEW GUIDE – PREPARE TO ASK QUESTIONS

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 goals do you have the development of a first-year attorney with the organization?
- If you give assignments to summer interns, what do you prefer in terms of communication and updates on the assignment?
- 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?

IX. PUBLIC INTEREST FUNDING

A. Summer Funding

There is great personal and professional value in spending a summer working in the arena of public interest law. The perceived disadvantage of pursuing a summer position in the public interest sector is the

lack of pay. It is true that many nonprofit summer positions lack an internal funding source. Fortunately, there are sources to which you can turn to provide financial support to summer public interest work.

1. 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 (SFP). SFP awards stipends to law students pursuing jobs in the public interest sector. The Program stipends are around \$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.) Students can request an additional \$1,000 of support if their summer position has financial commitments for relocating and/or regular travel. 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>.
2. The Rural Summer Legal Corps Equal Justice Works. The Rural Summer Legal Corp is an Equal Justice Works Program funded by AmeriCorps that provides 30 law students with the opportunity to earn a 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.
3. AmeriCorps JD Equal Justice Works. 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 applying for funding. If you are seeking an organization to work with this summer, there is a list of potential AmeriCorps JD host sites on at www.equaljusticeworks.org.
4. 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 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. Applications are usually due by the end of March. For further information: https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/homelessness_poverty/john_j_curtin_jr_fellowship1/.
5. Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) Summer Internships. For students interested in working in Chicago, this is a terrific 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 typically opens in fall. 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>.
6. PSJD. www.PSJD.org is an excellent resource for finding public interest jobs and funding. Marquette Law School is a member school, so access is free to all students. To find summer

funding sources, go to the web site and click on “Explore Advice” then click on “Funding Sources.” This links you to a lengthy list of fellowships and grants for specific employment opportunities.

7. Earning Credit. It’s not money, but the 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 fieldwork placements are excellent additions to a legal résumé and present significant opportunities to build relationships with local attorneys and organizations.

B. Post-Graduation Funding

Fellowships, Federal Honors Program, 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.

1. Fellowships. A fellow is awarded a specified sum of money after law school graduation for a fixed time (usually 1-2 years) to fulfill a specific purpose in a public interest setting. In other words— you get a stipend or salary to take on a public interest-focused position. Many fellowships offer benefit packages as well. Fellowships are very prestigious and are 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.

Two noteworthy Fellowships include the **Equal Justice Works Fellowship (EJW)** (<https://www.equaljusticeworks.org/become-a-fellow/>) 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 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.

2. Federal Honors Programs. Federal Honors positions are paid 1–2-year positions with federal government agencies and include federal benefits. Federal Honors Program positions 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 after two years. These positions are very prestigious and, as a result, competitive. For a comprehensive listing of these opportunities, students may visit the *Government Honors and Internship Handbook* via <http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/marquette> (Password: MarqLaw).
3. Resources for Locating and Researching Fellowships, Honors Programs & Funding. The following resources are recommended:

- [PSJD](http://www.psjd.org), an online website 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 cannot 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.

4. 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.
5. 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>

X. RESOURCES

A. Publications

Government Honors & Internship Handbook: Available in a searchable database online at <http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/marquette>. The password is MarqLaw.

Public Policy Handbook: Available in a searchable database online at <http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/marquette>. The password is MarqLaw.

Marquette University Law School Pro Bono Opportunities: A list of the most recent opportunities, including descriptions of the various clinic activities is available online at the Law School's website: pro-bono-projects-brochure.pdf (marquette.edu)

Career Planning Handbook: Provided to all students in print and available online at the Career Planning Center's website: <https://law.marquette.edu/career-planning/job-search-guides>.

B. Websites

The Career Planning Center has compiled a list of public interest-focused webpages. You may access this list if you are logged in with your account at the following webpage: <https://law.marquette.edu/career-planning/public-interest-and-pro-bono>.