



# PUBLIC SECTOR CAREERS GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION

*An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.*

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

PUBLIC SECTOR CAREERS provide lawyers with an opportunity to serve the public, foster societal change, advocate on behalf of issues, and provide services to indigent and underrepresented clients.

The University of Richmond School of Law Career Development Office (CDO) assists law students by presenting the myriad of [public service options](#). Through academics, community service, pro bono work, clinical advocacy programs, campus civic organizations, and employment prospects, students can begin building their careers in the public arena. This guide is designed to provide an overview of career opportunities within the public sector and the resources to search for public sector internships or post-graduate positions proactively.

Students considering public sector employment should take a number of factors into consideration. These include career objectives, geographic location, practice areas of interest, previous educational sector work and volunteer experiences, salaries, and foreign language skills.

Public sector positions vary widely, therefore, it is important to investigate and prepare for employment in this realm. Students interested in public sector careers should understand the distinctive characteristics of a given public sector position, participate in programs on campus and through community organizations, and develop their networking skills and connections in the area.

Public sector employers are often most interested in a student's passion and commitment to their mission. The CDO helps to facilitate a student's career exploration and decision-making through individual advising, self-assessment tools, resume and cover letter development, mock interview programs, workshops, panels, and networking opportunities with legal professionals. Each February, the law school holds a Government and Public Interest Job Fair, where many students find their summer internship positions, as well as some post-grad opportunities.

Public sector clinical placements and internships are excellent means to gain experience, build a legal profile and evaluate whether the public service domain fits one's career goals. Summer internships may be paid or unpaid. To support students working in public sector positions during the summer, the CDO provides information about funding resources, and the law school provides some funding through stipends. See the CDO's website for specific information about stipends and funding opportunities.

Internships and clinical placements often afford students substantial responsibility, an opportunity to be challenged while cultivating their legal skills, and the added dimension of contributing to a noteworthy cause. Many students in public sector internships work closely with clients and even

appear in court, gaining valuable legal experience and skills, while observing the life of a public-sector attorney. Public sector attorneys usually report considerable job satisfaction, even while salaries tend to be low: varying anywhere from approximately \$35,000 to just under \$100,000.

Some large law firms allow students to work part of the summer at the law firm, and to spend the rest of the summer at a public interest organization, while being paid by the law firm.

Most public sector lawyers spend their entire careers in the public sector, but some start there and later bring their knowledge, expertise, skills, and contacts to the private sector; while other attorneys choose to start in the private sector and intend to move to the public sector later in their careers. This private-to-public transition may be difficult if attorneys develop a lifestyle dependent on the higher salaries of the private sector. Attorneys in private practice often choose to pursue their desire to serve in the public sector realm by offering their legal services through *pro bono publico* (“for the public good”) work. (This is not to say that it is impossible to move from the private to the public sector—many attorneys do make this move, but you must make solid financial plans to do so smoothly.)

Public sector law generally encompasses the government, non-profit organizations, judicial system, and private public-interest law firms. Students who are interested in policy analysis and advocacy can consider working for private and public foundations as well as think tanks (such as The Brookings Institution). Government agencies offer a broad range of practice opportunities on the federal, state, and municipal levels. Lawyers work for the legislative branches of government as legislative assistants, staff, or in an advisory role to a committee. Further, they work in state attorneys general offices serving on behalf of various state agencies. In Virginia, for example, the [Office of the Attorney General](#) employs attorneys in six divisions, including Civil Litigation, Criminal, Fraud, and Health, Education, and Social Services.

Non-profit law firms offer direct legal assistance to low-income clientele and may focus their efforts on specific practice areas such as health care, education, landlord/tenant disputes, or disability rights. For-profit public interest law firms represent individuals or groups who are suing corporations or the government for large-scale grievances but charge reduced, sliding scale or class action fees. They also may provide legislative advocacy or lobbying on behalf of non-profit groups or causes.

Practicing law in the public sector presents a unique set of challenges, as practitioners may deal with individuals, organizations, government agencies, and a vast array of issues. Public interest advocacy and representation may involve individual advocacy or large-scale litigation, known as “impact litigation,” by firms or organizations working to advocate for causes.

## **Non-Profit Organizations**

Non-profit organizations receive tax-exempt status due to their public interest mission. Many provide direct legal services. Some are focused more heavily on social causes while others focus on individual cases. Public interest lawyers deal with such issues as the environment; death penalty; AIDS/HIV; voting rights; economic development; immigration; education; domestic violence; reproductive, children’s and women’s rights; employment; and homelessness. Examples of non-profit organizations that undertake “impact litigation” are the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) (NRDC) and the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU).

Issue advocacy is at the heart of many other non-profit organizations such as Coalition for the Homeless. These lawyers work to draft model legislation and lobby before Congress, state, and local governmental bodies researching and developing public policy, and engage in advocacy for a particular constituency.

Lawyers who work on the international level may engage in diplomatic relations or develop and administer international policy and programs. International public interest opportunities include working at the United Nations (UN), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and a multitude of international entities, agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

## Government Agencies

Federal, state, and municipal localities as well as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches offer lawyers a wide scope of government sector opportunities. Lawyers are employed by public agencies, commissions, departments, and quasi-government and intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the World Bank). They can serve in a non-litigation or advisory role as representatives performing regulatory and administrative legal duties or as litigators navigating complex litigation. Agency counselors monitor compliance with federal regulations and administrative laws, represent agencies, draft legislation, and provide assistance with litigation matters. The [United States Department of Justice \(DOJ\)](#) employs the overwhelming majority of federal government attorneys. Many of these are U.S. Attorneys—federal prosecutors—each assigned to a judicial district. They serve in a variety of capacities by prosecuting individuals or organizations who are alleged to have breached federal law and litigating civil lawsuits to which the United States is a party. There are a variety of [DOJ internships and employment opportunities](#).

Numerous state and municipal legal positions offer lawyers similar roles to those at the federal level. Lawyers serve as counsel for state and local governments as well as in the legislature assisting with such duties as drafting legislation, administering regulations, and enforcing compliance measures. Each state government's legal department is headed by the Attorney General and these offices are typically divided into practice sections. State prosecutors, known as [district attorneys](#) (in Virginia, [commonwealth's attorneys](#)), prosecute cases at the local level (see State Prosecutors section, below).

Working in the legislative branch provides an experience to serve as staff attorneys for members of Congress, for committees, and for administrative offices. For those interested in legislative and policy work on Capitol Hill, both the [Senate](#) and the [House of Representatives](#) maintain job listings. Contacting your own representatives in Congress can also be a good way to secure an internship or career on Capitol Hill.

## Government Honors Programs

Honors Attorneys programs are available for summer or post-graduate employment through a number of federal agencies, such as the Department of Justice, Department of Commerce, Federal Trade Commission, Internal Revenue Service Chief Counsel, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Interior, and Department of Labor's Office of the

Solicitor. Each agency contains numerous divisions. For example, the Department of Commerce includes the International Trade Administration, Economic Development Administration, Patent and Trademark Office, and Minority Business Development Agency, among many others. For general information about government internships and honors programs as well as deadlines, refer to the [Government Honors & Internship Handbook](#) (see the CDO for passwords for this subscription service). For general information about careers in the federal government, check [PSJD's Federal Legal Employment Guide](#) and the Leadership Library (available through the Muse Law Library online databases) and the Federal Yellow Book (in the library). Federal opportunities are usually posted in [USAJobs](#).

## Presidential Management Fellowship Program

The [Presidential Management Fellowship Program](#) provides graduates with an opportunity to develop their interests in leadership, public management, and public policy with various agencies within the federal government. The program provides a high degree of formal training and serves as a paid opportunity to gain access to accelerated development of one's career. Initial positions may or may not involve actual practice of law, but many positions involve policy and legal analysis and applicants with JDs have an advantage. Prospective fellows apply in the fall of their 3L year, and enter after graduation at the GS-9, GS-10, or GS-12 levels, with eligibility for up to a GS-13 level during the program. Further, they are eligible for conversion to permanent positions after a two-year period. An applicant must take an exam that is administered by the Office of Personnel Management. This highly competitive program has an early fall deadline that varies each year.

## Federal Intern Programs

The [Student Educational Employment Program](#) offers students [summer internship](#) opportunities with federal government agencies. Other programs include the [Pathways Program](#), which may include summer, academic-year, and post-grad employment opportunities. After completing an internship, an intern will be eligible to apply for a permanent position within the agency. These positions are posted on [USAJobs](#) and on individual agency websites.

## Legal Aid

Legal Aid offices provide legal services to the underrepresented and those who cannot afford legal representation. Many legal aid programs receive federal funds through the [Legal Services Corporation](#). Legal Aid attorneys work directly with clients and handle litigation and transactional matters, as well as negotiation on behalf of clients. Offices that do not receive federal funding also advocate for policy issues or conduct lobbying efforts. Locally, the [Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Inc.](#) (receives federal funding) and the [Legal Aid Justice Center](#) (does not) both provide free civil legal representation to eligible clients. These organizations have offices in several other Virginia localities as well. Throughout Virginia, legal coverage is provided [Rappahannock Legal Services](#) (north central Virginia), [Blue Ridge Legal Services](#) (Shenandoah and Roanoke Valleys), [Virginia Legal Aid Society](#) (Southside, western Tidewater), [Southwest Virginia Legal Aid Society](#) (Southwest Virginia), [Legal Services of Northern](#)

[Virginia](#) (NoVA), [Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia](#) (Tidewater, Eastern Shore), and [Legal Aid Society of the Roanoke Valley](#) (Roanoke Valley). Nationally, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association provides an excellent resource of legal services information: [The Directory of Legal Aid & Defender Offices and Resources](#).

## Public Defense

Public defenders typically are employed directly by federal, state or local government in public defender offices, or the government may contract with attorneys through non-profits to provide defense services for underrepresented or indigent clients. Public defenders usually start trying cases in court almost immediately after taking on the position: even new attorneys have demanding caseloads requiring intensive trial preparation. They interview witnesses and clients, file pre-trial and other motions, negotiate sentencing options, and try cases. Public defender offices are located [throughout Virginia](#) and [nationwide](#). In Virginia, attorneys cannot be hired as public defenders until they have been admitted to the bar and become certified to be appointed by courts to represent indigent clients in criminal cases. However, programs such as Richmond Law's [Bridge to Practice fellowship](#), allow recent graduates to work in a public defender's office under the authority of their Third-year Practice Certificate while they await bar results. This gives recent graduates experience in the courtroom, and the opportunity to become certified, and, therefore, eligible for hire immediately after being admitted. [Federal Public Defenders](#) represent clients who are charged with crimes in federal court.

## State Prosecutors

In Virginia, state prosecutors are called [commonwealth's attorneys](#) (in many states, they are referred to as district attorneys). The chief Commonwealth Attorney is an elected official, and the assistant commonwealth's attorneys are appointed. New attorneys typically are not hired until they have been admitted to the bar, but offices in rural localities may hire recent grads and allow them to begin working once they are admitted (again, the [Bridge to Practice fellowship](#) will allow those students who have received the fellowship to work using their Third-year Certificate while awaiting results). Prosecutors do not require certification from the state before they may start working, but like public defenders, typically start trying cases immediately.

## Judicial Clerkships

Judicial clerkships are prestigious, highly-competitive opportunities for new attorneys to hone their research, analytical, and writing skills while observing legal proceedings behind the scenes as the close associate of a judge. Law students apply for federal or state appellate judicial clerkships during the spring of their second year of law school, and for state circuit court clerkships in the early fall of their third year. Judicial clerkships may be obtained with trial and appellate judges and in specialized courts (e.g., U.S. Tax Court, or with administrative law judges (ALJs) in federal agencies), typically for one- or two-year periods. While in law school, many students serve as judicial interns with judges during the summer, or as externs during school year (through the school's [clinical placement](#) program).

Richmond Law has an impressive record of judicial clerkship placements. Please visit our office for assistance with the application process. For more information, please refer to the CDO's Judicial Clerkship Handbook, the [Online System for Clerkship Application Review \(OSCAR\)](#), and Richmond's [Judicial Clerkship Webpage](#). The Leadership Library, available through the Muse Law Library's online databases, is another resource for locating biographical information about federal and state judges, judicial staff, and law clerks. See also, [the Federal Judiciary](#), [National Center for State Courts](#), and [Vermont Guide to State Court Clerkships](#) (see CDO for password information). To find a judge's recent opinions or conduct further judicial research, see Lexis or Westlaw.

## Employment Search Resources

Being resourceful in your pursuit of public sector employment will be to your advantage. Many of these positions are in offices nationally and internationally that do not have formalized recruiting operations. Often, students find opportunities to match their interests through proactive leg work, researching opportunities that may not be posted. See the last page of this handbook for listings of organizations and websites that may help in your search.

A public interest job search can be considerably different from a law firm job search, both in terms of the application process and required qualifications. Some private law firms offer post-graduate positions to rising third-year students following their second-year summer internship, while non-profit and non-governmental organizations generally make offers only when an opening presents. In addition, recruitment and offers are typically made by the practicing legal professionals rather than by human resources personnel or recruiters. However, some organizations' point of entry may be through [fellowships](#): one- to two-year positions paid for by special funding sources.

Second- and third-year students interested in public sector careers are urged to meet with CDO staff to begin researching areas of interest and creating applications for summer internships, post-graduate fellowships, and other similar positions (such as honors programs) in early fall. First-year law students will meet with CDO staff beginning in mid-October, and will begin applying for positions on December 1, in keeping with [guidelines](#) set by NALP, the Association for Legal Career Professionals.

The CDO post job listings from public interest organizations via [Symplicity](#), the comprehensive online employment database. Check Symplicity frequently for updates and new job postings. Attending public sector career fairs, such as the fall [Equal Justice Career Fair and Conference](#) in Washington, D.C., is another opportunity to investigate employment choices and to network with employers. Each winter, the University of Richmond hosts the [Government and Public Interest Interview Program](#) in collaboration with William & Mary and Washington and Lee University law schools. GPIIP is exclusively for students to interview with public sector employers. Some public sector employers, including state and federal government agencies, participate in on campus interviews (OCI) throughout the fall. Students also are encouraged to research agencies or organizations of interest, to pay attention deadlines for potential opportunities, and to contact prospective employers to seek a position during the academic year as well as summer. It is important to network with legal professionals and request informational interviews to gain insights as well as crucial contacts. Even if an employer does not have a position available, a strong enthusiastic interview and contact history may lead to a future opportunity.

## Public Interest Curricula and Experience Opportunities

The University of Richmond School of Law offers students numerous [curriculum](#) choices, clinical opportunities and pro bono programs to gain skills, build a public interest profile and demonstrate your commitment to public service. The curricular choices that would be particularly useful for a public sector legal career will depend on your intended practice area. For example, if you are interested in pursuing a career in criminal law, courses such as Evidence, Criminal Process, Domestic Violence Seminar, and Capital Murder Litigation would be beneficial.

Clinical programs and placements allow second- and third-year students to develop an understanding of day-to-day lawyering: working directly with clients; polishing research and writing skills; and courtroom experience. With the expertise and support of faculty, students not only learn invaluable tools, but also immeasurably enhance their resumes. The University of Richmond's in-house clinical programs include the Children's Defense Clinic, the Education Rights Clinic, the Family Law Clinic, the Institute for Actual Innocence, and the Intellectual Property and Transactional Law Clinic. There are also many opportunities for outside clinical placements, all through the school's [Clinical Programs](#).

Students also may provide legal assistance to underrepresented persons through the law school's [Harry L. Carrico Center for Pro Bono Service](#). Programs include the Immigrant Victims Assistance Project; the Richmond Families Initiative; the Prisoner Reentry Program; the Pro Bono Criminal Appeals Program; Assistance to Disabled Veterans; and help with no-fault divorces and estate planning for low-income clients. Pro bono work is an excellent way to demonstrate commitment and dedication to public service. Students may also participate in community activism, service learning, and educational programming through the University of Richmond's [Bonner Center for Civic Engagement](#) or through various [law student organizations](#).

## Loan Forgiveness Programs

Financial assistance with the debt load from student loans is available for those who are interested in pursuing a public interest career. The [College Cost Reduction and Access Act \(CCRAA\)](#) provides for an income-based repayment [option](#). It assists students with monthly loan payments following graduation based on compensation and family size. For most eligible borrowers, less than 10% of income must be paid on student debt regardless of employment in the public or private sector. The John R. Justice Prosecutors and Defenders Incentive Act of 2008, administered by the [Bureau of Justice Assistance](#) provides loan forgiveness specifically for federal and state prosecutors and public defenders.

In addition, those who are employed in the public sector, such as local, state, or federal government or with a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization such as [AmeriCorps JD](#), or other public service organization for a period of 10 years (or 120 qualifying loan payments) can qualify for assistance with [Federal Direct Loans](#). The requisite specifications must be in place in order to qualify for this option. Students must familiarize themselves with this debt relief plan prior to graduation in order to benefit from it.

[Equal Justice Works \(EJW\)](#), along with NALP's [Public Service Jobs Database \(PSJD\)](#), also provide extensive information about public service loan forgiveness, including lists of loan forgiveness programs, webinars, and low-interest programs.



### LIST OF INTERNET RESOURCES

1. NALP, the [Association for Legal Career Professionals](#), provides detailed information about employment in a variety of settings.
2. [www.psjd.org](http://www.psjd.org) (NALP's Public Service Jobs Database) Comprehensive resource for internship opportunities, fellowships, postgraduate listings. You will need a password from the CDO to log in to this subscription service. Check out their [User Guide](#).
3. Virginia state jobs website: <http://jobs.virginia.gov/>
4. PSJD's [Federal Legal Employment Guide](#) The whys, hows and wherefores of federal legal employment, including various federal entry-level opportunities.
5. <http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm> Contact the CDO for username and password (UR subscribes to this service). Contains a wide array of federal government summer internship programs and post-graduate honors programs.
6. [Vermont Guide to Judicial Clerkships](#) (also a subscription service: contact CDO for log-in)
7. <http://www.usajobs.gov> The federal government's official site for federal jobs and internships.
8. <http://www.idealists.org> Public service positions, legal and non-legal, in over 140 countries. Particularly good for post-graduate listings. Can search by subject matter, country, type of position, and other categories.
9. <http://www.nlada.org/jobop.htm> -- National Legal Aid and Defender Association Post-graduate positions in civil legal services organizations and defender organizations. Other public interest organizations also included. Searchable by state.
10. [Philanthropy News Digest jobs listing](#)
11. [Center for International Environmental Law](#)
12. [Global Rights Internships Global Rights internships](#)
13. <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org> Human Rights First
14. <http://www.hrw.org/jobs/> -- Human Rights Watch
15. <http://www.cicr.org> - International Committee of the Red Cross – does not offer summer internships, but does offer post-grad fellowships.
16. <http://ictj.org/careers> International Center for Transitional Justice
17. <http://www.humanrightsjobs.com/>
18. <http://www.hrusa.org/field/joblinks.shtml> -- Human Rights Resource Center: jobs
19. <http://www.asil.org/about/asil-internships> American Society of International Law internships
20. <http://us.oneworld.net/section/us/jobs> -- One World international jobs and internships
21. <http://www.reliefweb.int/vacancies/> -- Reliefweb international jobs and internships
22. <http://www.soros.org/about/careers> -- Open Society Institute jobs and internships
23. ABA International Jobs and Internships Portal:  
[http://www.americanbar.org/groups/international\\_law/students/jobs.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/international_law/students/jobs.html)



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