APPENDIX: OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC INTEREST WORK

Public interest work is done in a wide variety of practice settings. Lawyers also use different advocacy approaches. Finally, different organizations focus on different issue areas or areas of practice. You will want to think about what practice settings you prefer, what advocacy approaches appeal to you, and what issues engage you.

To assist you in this process, here we identify the most common practice settings, with descriptions of work types and examples of issue areas identified for each one. (Be aware, though, that in many organizations these categories will overlap and blend together). In the next section, we provide a general list of public interest issues areas.

PRACTICE SETTINGS AND ADVOCACY APPROACHES

Non-profit legal services organizations:

Civil legal services organizations (referred to as “legal services” or “legal aid” in some jurisdictions) provide services directly to individual low-income clients, at no cost or on a sliding scale. This work is often referred to as “direct service work” or “direct legal services” because the lawyers work directly for their clients, on their individual legal needs. Areas of practice include, but are not limited to, housing, family, domestic violence, consumer, government benefits, employment, health and education. Most legal services offices focus on a range of practice areas though some specialize in one area or a specific population.

Legal services providers have substantial contact with clients. Lawyers do significant client interviewing and counseling, investigation, meeting with witnesses, case preparation, out of court advocacy, negotiation, and litigation. Legal services lawyers appear in housing court, family court, civil court and before administrative agencies. In some offices, lawyers are involved in related law reform efforts, and self-help and community education.

Non-profit law reform organizations:

Law reform organizations focus on efforts to bring about social change that will impact more than one person. Generally, they focus on a particular issue area or on a particular group of people. Lawyers in these organizations tend to use a variety of advocacy tools, including “impact litigation” (which is litigation on behalf of selected clients, aimed at changing the law for many people rather than an individual client), “legislative advocacy” (which is geared at influencing law-making bodies to enact or reform the law, or is geared at helping lobbyists and other advocates in their work), investigative reporting and media work (to publicize a legal problem or reform efforts); “policy advocacy” (which can take many forms, but is generally geared at identifying legal problems and advocating for solutions such as
legislative change or legal reform); and legal education (usually focusing on helping individuals learn their legal rights and how to exercise them).

Lawyers in law reform organizations generally do significant amounts of legal research, writing and analysis. Many are involved in large scale litigation. They tend to become specialized in a particular subject area. Law reform organizations focus on a wide range of issues (such as immigration, environmental, women, first amendment, voting or other constitutional issues, civil rights, human rights and so forth) and can work on both domestic and international platforms. See more about international public interest work below.

**Criminal Law: Public Defenders and Prosecutor’s Offices:**

**Public Defenders**
Funded by the government, privately as nonprofits, or through a combination, these offices provide defense attorneys for indigent defendants in criminal cases. Some offices also will have attorneys handling appellate work, or providing legal assistance for the civil consequences of criminal cases (for example, housing, immigration and family issues). A few offices will only handle appeals.

As a general matter, lawyers – including new lawyers – are responsible for all phases of representation, including interviewing clients, investigating charges, interviewing witnesses, motion practice, legal research and writing, trial strategy, negotiation and plea bargaining, and preparing for and conducting hearings and trials.

Some defense organizations employ an interdisciplinary approach, and have social workers and other non-lawyers as part of the team helping each client.

**Prosecution offices**
These are local, state, and federal government offices that prosecute criminal cases. These are the District Attorney’s Offices, the criminal division of the Attorney General’s Offices, the U.S. Attorney’s Offices, and the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington DC.

Local District Attorney’s Offices are organized by county. Larger offices may have specialized units focusing on areas such as homicide, narcotics, domestic violence, sexual assault and appellate work. Lawyers assume significant case responsibilities from early on, including interviewing witnesses, preparing cases for trial, plea negotiations, and handling trials.

State Attorney General’s Offices will usually have a criminal division that investigates and prosecutes cases of statewide significance. Areas are likely to include organized and white collar crime, narcotics, and criminal enforcement of environmental protection laws.

U.S. Attorney’s Offices prosecute federal crimes in the federal courts. These include drug crimes, economic or “white collar” crimes and organized crime.
Caseloads are smaller than at the local level, though cases are generally more complicated and lawyers often are involved at the investigation stage as well as the trial phase.

U.S. Department of Justice ("DOJ") shares responsibility for the prosecution of federal crimes. The Criminal Division of the DOJ has specialized sections, in areas that include fraud, narcotics, organized crime and terrorism. Other divisions, such as Tax, Civil Rights, and Antitrust, handle some criminal prosecutions in their areas. In addition, lawyers at the DOJ provide policy and logistical support to U.S. Attorney's offices.

Government: Federal, State, and Local:

The government has many opportunities for lawyers in areas outside of criminal prosecution, focusing, for example, on civil issues, legislative work and regulatory practice. Most major agencies at all levels of government have lawyers on staff.

Attorneys General's offices employ most lawyers working at the state level. They represent the state in most of its litigation, as both plaintiff and defendant. Lawyers in Attorney General's offices and other executive branch agencies also provide legal opinions and advice about drafting and interpretation of regulations, legislation, and policies.

Government litigation involves an enormous array of subject areas - including the environment, labor, housing and urban development, social security and other benefits, national security, civil rights, and international issues.

The legislative branches of local, state and federal governments also have lawyers who advise on legislation and other legal issues, formulate public policy and represent lawmakers' or institutional interests on committees or elsewhere.

The government legal world is vast and can be difficult to navigate. Students interested in government work should consult other SJI publications that deal exclusively with public sector opportunities, including SJI's guides to government careers in a variety of practice areas.

International Public Interest Work:

The types of international public service work vary widely, as do the settings in which attorneys practice. International public interest practice can include human rights and public law work. Settings include U.S. Government agencies working on international issues (such as the Department of State and the Department of Commerce); inter-governmental (IGO) organizations (such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization of American States, international tribunals, and the International Criminal Court); non-profit organizations in the U.S. (such as Human Rights Watch, International Red Cross, and Amnesty International); and non-governmental organizations (NGO) abroad (focusing on such areas as development, human rights, and transitional justice).
Again, type of work varies greatly, though international employers generally require proficiency in at least one foreign language, and demonstration of an ability to live and work within different cultures. It is important to take steps to define the area of international work that you are interested in: location (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America/the Caribbean, Middle East, United States), type of organization, and area of law. Often - for a summer internship - you will be able to draw on experiences you had prior to law school.

**Private Public Interest Law Firms:**

Private public interest law firms are often small and specialize in one or more public interest issue areas (for example, employment discrimination, civil rights, labor law, police brutality, consumer rights, and immigration) or work with underrepresented groups. Often, firms will charge fees on a sliding scale, and/or maintain a traditional private practice in order to cover the costs associated with the public interest work and/or will only take cases under certain federal statutes that provide fees. Some private public interest firms specialize in “class actions” (which are lawsuits on behalf of a group of similarly-situated plaintiffs, aimed at bringing redress to them as well as potentially changing the law, depending on the particular case). A handbook, Private Public Interest and Plaintiff’s Firm Guide, lists such firms throughout the country and is available on the SJI website.

**Alternative Public Interest Lawyering:**

A number of public interest organizations emphasize non-traditional approaches to law reform - by this we refer to non-profits that de-emphasize litigation in favor of such strategies as community organizing, coalition building, media, education, and developing alternatives to litigation, such as alternative dispute resolution (ADR) or mediation. While public interest organizations invariably use a variety of strategies to advance their work and the interests of the clients and communities they represent, some are designed to specifically favor such non-traditional approaches.

For organizations that do community organizing and education, and work collaboratively with community groups, lawyers work closely and frequently with community members. Other organizations may focus on project development, in which case research, collaboration with stakeholders, writing and coalition building would comprise much of the work.

**In-house Counsel:**

In addition, another example of alternative public interest lawyering is serving as in-house counsel to non-profit organizations, such as hospitals, universities or advocacy organizations. Serving as in-house counsel in this capacity would entail mostly transactional work in a range of areas impacting the organization - employment, tax, contracts, etc.
Alternatives (Altogether) to Traditional Public Interest Lawyering

Of course, lawyers can and do work in many areas and organizations and not practice law at all. Legal training and skills can be desirable and useful in a range of positions that may not require a legal degree – such as policy analysis, journalism, non-profit management, and economic development. Other skills and expertise would be important as well: for example, skills such as writing, program management, languages, or mediation, and expertise in financial or other technical areas. In almost all situations, however, we would encourage you to do legal work for at least your first summer, and – if you are inclined – pursue such non-legal positions later on. Legal internship positions can be found in a range of organizations that would expose you to non-legal work as well.

Courts:

Clerking for a judge – or eventually serving in the judiciary – is another potential legal path. For information, please contact the Director of Judicial Clerkships and Academic Counseling in the Dean of Students Office.

Academia:

Teaching at a law school is also another option for a law career. For more information about this, please visit Columbia’s Careers in Law Teaching Program at http://www.law.columbia.edu/careers/law_teaching.
LEGAL ISSUES

There are a vast array of legal topics and legal subject areas that you can pursue with your law degree. Below are some examples of these issues:

- Aids/HIV
- Animal Rights
- Arts
- Bankruptcy
- Children/Youth
- Civil Rights
- Community Development
- Consumer
- Criminal (Prosecution, Defense, Death Penalty, Prisoner’s Rights)
- Direct Legal Services for Low Income Clients
- Disability
- Domestic Violence
- Economic Justice
- Education
- Elder Law
- Employment/ Labor/ Work With Dignity
- Environment/ Energy
- Family Law
- Farmworker
- Financial/ Nonprofit
- First Amendment
- Health
- Homelessness/Housing/Foreclosure
- Immigration/Refugee
- International Human Rights
- Legal Reform/ Court Reform/ Government Accountability
- LGBTQI
- National Security
- Native American Rights
- Poverty
- Racial Justice
- Reproductive Rights
- Transitional Justice
- Transportation
- Voting/ Campaign Finance
- Women’s Rights