



Public Interest/Civil Rights Law Firms: A Fact Sheet

Key takeaways:

- ❖ What public interest/civil rights law firms¹ and their lawyers do.
- ❖ How to decide whether to spend a summer at a public interest/civil rights law firm.
- ❖ How to decide whether to pursue a postgraduate position at a public interest/civil rights law firm.
- ❖ Contact [Tory Messina](#), Senior Career Advisor in Social Justice Initiatives, to learn more.
- ❖ Get connected to our extensive public interest/civil rights law firm graduate network (Public Interest Law Firm Overview).

INTRODUCTION

What are public interest/civil rights law firms?

Public interest/civil rights law firms are mission-driven private law practices. They have a clear dedication to a particular area or areas of civil rights practice and to the clients impacted by that practice, and they have adopted litigation as their key strategy to address social or economic justice problems. Graduates have said that this is “work you feel good about”² and that it provides a chance to “advocate for a client” or act as a “private attorney general.” Each firm indicates its mission on its website and includes selected cases that highlight their expertise and priorities. While some firms have a specific subject area (e.g. employment-related cases or criminal justice civil work), others have multiple practice areas based on a broad commitment to civil rights work and the expertise of their partners. Still others are happy to focus on the needs of their clients and remain client-driven in all their work. All firms discussed in this document have reputations for excellent legal work that makes a big impact on clients, on the law, or both.

Why should I work at a public interest/civil rights law firm?

These firms are great places for lawyers who would like to litigate. Public interest/civil rights law firms 1) focus on litigation; 2) almost always represent plaintiffs and bring affirmative litigation; 3)

¹ A note on terminology: firms may call themselves “private public interest law firms,” “public interest law firms,” “civil rights law firms,” and/or “plaintiff’s side law firms.” As long as they meet the criteria of being primarily mission-driven, we include them here. For simplicity, we refer to them as “public interest/civil rights law firms”. Please note that the term “plaintiff’s side law firm” encompasses a large number of firms who focus on affirmative litigation, including Big Law firms, a group too large to address here.

² Quotes from graduates, based on their personal experiences at civil rights law firms, appear throughout this document.

are smaller than “Big Law” firms (some employ as few as two or three practitioners, none more than 200 attorneys); 4) may focus on class action work or dedicate some portion of their practice to it; and 5) provide junior attorneys with a lot of responsibility in litigation right away.

Why pursue a job at a public interest/civil rights law firm?

One main reason to work at a public interest/civil rights law firm is that these firms provide the opportunity to gain hands-on experience and/or skill development while doing work in the public interest. These firms enable junior attorneys to develop excellent litigation skills. Across the board, our graduates report getting “lots of experience very quickly” while working with “smart partners and colleagues” who pursue thoughtful and innovative legal strategies. Columbia Law School (CLS) graduates at these firms felt that after two or three years, they had learned to manage their own litigation docket, including motion practice, depositions, discovery, and (to some extent) court appearances in at least one area of practice. “The associate responsibility and learning curve is high, with immersion into litigation and adversarial lawyering” guaranteed for those who take this path.

How do public interest/civil rights law firms finance their work?

While some firms have found a way to make their civil rights cases a sustainable source of revenue, other firms support their civil rights work by other means, including: 1) taking on some types of traditional commercial litigation; 2) performing industry-focused consulting or other work related to their expertise; 3) reducing their expenses (e.g., by employing a small support staff); and/or 4) focusing on cases that could generate fees. A focus on revenue generation means that some firms do not handle cases that could make “good law and push the legal framework in absence of a clear path to winning or providing the firm with a benefit.” Other firms focus on pushing the law and advocating for a particular position through other means, such as paying lower salaries to partners and associates or using their non-litigation work to finance their litigation advocacy. Still other firms work on a contingency basis, including using loans to front the costs of litigation, only recovering the costs should they settle or win.

How (and how well) do public interest/civil rights law firms pay their associates?

Every firm sets associate compensation independently. Some firms offer lockstep salaries, transparency, and firm-wide bonus policies. Others require that associates negotiate individually, and as a result their bonus policies can feel “opaque.” While some small-market firms offer low associate pay (compared to commercial law practice) and limited benefit packages, others offset lower pay with strong benefits packages (which might include money for professional development, bar dues, or conferences). The vast majority of graduates reported higher pay at the public interest/civil rights law firms than at local nonprofits in the region and characterize their salaries as “comfortable,” with regular raises and bonuses provided.

Where do graduates go when they leave the public interest/civil rights law firm practice?

When leaving public interest/civil rights law firms, attorneys primarily pursue other public interest opportunities. They go to government positions at local and federal agencies, including state Attorneys General and Department of Justice offices; prominent national and local nonprofits (such as the ACLU); law schools, both for clinical and academic teaching; courts, as clerks;

public defender offices; and other public interest/civil rights law firms. It is uncommon, but not unheard of, for attorneys to move to the private sector after working at public interest/civil rights law firms.

SUMMER ASSOCIATE POSITIONS

How do I know if I want to spend a summer at a public interest/civil rights law firm?³

Advantages: There are several reasons one might decide to do a summer internship at a public interest/civil rights law firm. These include:

- These firms may offer the opportunity to participate in entrepreneurial legal thinking.
- They may also provide interns access to litigation work at many different stages, including legal research, strategy, briefing, development of cases, depositions, and shadowing more senior attorneys at client meetings or court hearings.
- The internship may provide information about, and exposure to, the regional job market.
- Interns can build relationships with the firm and with those who recognize the work of the firm, which is useful for finding sponsors for postgraduate fellowships and for networking more broadly.
- Firm attorneys can provide references for fellowships, clerkships, or other postgraduate opportunities.
- The position can expose interns to work of nonprofits (if the firm is co-counseling a case with a nonprofit).

Disadvantages: There are some disadvantages to seeking a summer internship at a public interest/civil rights law firm. These include:

- Many of these firms do not hire 1Ls, so these positions are only open to 2Ls.
- The mentoring available for summer interns varies by firm.
- Some firms expect interns to work long, intense hours.
- The firm may not hire post-grad or do very limited post-grad hiring (and often this hiring will not be straight from law school); therefore, even if a student is very successful at his/her internship, it may not result in a job offer.
- Some public interest employers prefer interns who have spent their summer at a nonprofit rather than at a firm.
- Some firms do not offer summer interns the opportunities they might get at a nonprofit, such as client contact.

What do I need to get the job?

Applicants for summer positions should show a clear commitment to the mission of the firm, an interest in litigation, and a familiarity with the firm's work. Preference is given to applicants who have some knowledge of, or experience in, civil rights and human rights, e.g. through participation in internships, clinics, classes, and/or pro bono work. Participation in a clinic taught by a civil rights law firm practitioner is especially helpful. Public interest/civil rights law firms also

³ Please note that these are generalizations. Experiences will vary from firm to firm. In addition, what is an advantage at one firm may not appeal to another. Please make an appointment to talk with Tory Messina to discuss your specific goals, interests, and target law firms.

prefer to hire students who have some litigation experience through moot courts, externships or clinics. These firms may also be interested in grades, particularly for 2Ls.

I am interested in applying for a summer internship. What are my next steps?

Once you decide that you are interested in summering at a public interest/civil rights law firm, please reach out to [Tory Messina](#) to schedule an appointment. You might also contact CLS graduates who work (or have worked) at a particular firm to get the “inside scoop” about the summer experience at that firm. (Please see the Public Interest Law Firm Overview for information on thirty public interest law firms). Questions you might ask include:

1. How big is the summer class?
2. What kinds of case assignments do summer associates get?
3. What is the role of a summer associate in the cases assigned (i.e. would you get client interaction or attend court)?
4. How are cases assigned to summer interns? Can you request particular types of cases (or a particular case)? Are there opportunities to work with a range of attorneys at the firm?
5. Does the firm co-counsel? If so, with whom?
6. Is there a mentoring program for summer associates? Are there other programs for summer associates?
7. Do you provide recommendations for clerkship or fellowship applications for summer associates?
8. Will the firm stay in touch with me after I leave?

POSTGRADUATE POSITIONS

How do I know if I want to work at a public interest/civil rights law firm after graduation?

There are advantages and disadvantages to going to a public interest/civil rights law firm after graduation.⁴

Advantages: These include:

- At all firms, associates gets lots of “hands-on” experience and a high level of responsibility very quickly. For example, you can get “meaty” cases that will allow you to learn how to do depositions, discovery strategy, and so forth.
- At all firms, you are part of a strong professional network for the rest of your legal life.
- Very high-volume caseload (which can be an advantage in that it gives a lot of exposure and experience).
- Partners often take mentoring very seriously.
- Excellent support staff and paralegals.
- Meaningful work, often with great clients.
- Associates and partners are smart and talented.
- Being at a firm with a great reputation benefits your resume.
- A very diverse set of civil rights (and commercial) cases.

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- May have great work/life balance

Disadvantages: These include:

- Pressures of litigation result in poor work/life balance at some firms.
- Challenging personalities/partners.
- Very high-volume caseload.
- High associate turnover.
- May have informal office policies and no Human Resources department.
- Little or no focus on professional development.
- Limited range of matters may hinder professional growth.
- A “sink or swim” attitude and lack of investment in associates.

What do I need to get a permanent (post-grad) job?

The firms look for similar qualities in their associates as they do in summer interns, namely, a demonstrated commitment to civil rights and litigation and good grades.

Cover letter: Your cover letter should address how you share both the mission to serve and the mission to use this type of litigation, including the role of the courts in promoting civil rights. Time spent working at a “defense” or big law private firm is not generally a bar to being hired if you have demonstrated a commitment to the work of the public interest/civil rights firm.

References: Most jobs will require a reference or referral from someone with personal contacts at the firm. You may be able to make your own contacts by reaching out to relevant CLS grads.

Writing sample: Firms look for the ability to write well and quickly. They also value evidence of creative legal thinking (i.e. a law school note that covers a practical view of litigation).

Clerkship: Some firms require a clerkship, preferably a federal district court clerkship.

I am interested in a post-grad job: What are my next steps?

Once you decide that you are interested in working at a public interest/civil rights law firms, please reach out to [Tory Messina](#) to schedule a conversation. You can also contact CLS graduates who work (or have worked) at a particular firm to get the “inside scoop” on what it’s like to work at that firm. (Please see the Public Interest Law Firm Overview for information about thirty public interest law firms.) Questions you might ask include:

1. What are the bulk of the cases that associates work on?
2. How are cases assigned? How do associates work with partners? What are the assignments associates are assigned straight away? How are cases structured/staffed?
3. Do associates get to take on their own cases? What kinds of cases do these tend to be?
4. What is the firm’s culture? Are any partners difficult to work with? What are the hours? What does work/life balance look like to those at the firm?
5. Is there a partnership track?

6. Is there a plan for mentoring and professional development? What does capacity-building look like? How much are new attorneys on their own for their cases or professional development?
7. How long do associates usually stay at the firm? Where do they go from here?

ROADMAP TO PUBLIC INTEREST/CIVIL RIGHTS LAW FIRM CAREERS

As a 1L

- Commit to your classes and get any help you need to succeed academically.
- Find ways to connect with your commitment to civil rights, social justice, and litigation through pro bono, moot courts, pro bono Caravans, and other activities.
- Plan for a 1L summer job; while positions with public interest/civil rights law firms are hard to get, opportunities at nonprofits and government organizations, especially where you connect with the litigation process, a client population, or a civil rights topic are all viable steps.
- As you consider whether to participate in EIP, do not feel the need to either pursue or not pursue a Big Law job; do whatever feels right for you, including focusing on 2L summer positions at public interest/civil rights law firms. However, if you do pursue a Big Law job, make sure that you are identifying strong litigation firms.
- Talk to a Social Justice Initiatives Advisor and connect with [Tory Messina](#).

As a 2L & 3L

- Know the plan for your 2L summer job applications no later than August of your 1L summer as many of the most elite public interest/civil rights law firms and related public interest employers (impact litigation nonprofits and government positions) have early hiring schedules.
- Continue to focus on academics.
- Continue to connect with your commitment to civil rights, social justice, and litigation.
- Apply for postgraduate clerkships 2L year, as relevant.
- Apply for postgraduate clerkships, fellowships, Government Honors, and other postgraduate positions 3L year, as relevant.
 - Consider postgraduate (after 3L or a clerkship) fellowships with public interest/civil rights law firms (see our spreadsheet of civil rights law firms for firms that offer postgraduate fellowships)
- Classes/activities that you might find helpful as you prepare for the work of a public interest/civil rights law firm include:
 - Participating in moot courts.
 - Focusing your Note or other significant writing on an issue you want to pursue, including novel and innovative ways to use litigation or practical applications of the laws through the courts.
 - Take practice-focused classes and litigation classes to help you prepare and be looked upon favorably by law firms:
 - Look for classes taught by practitioners from public interest/civil rights law firms. For example, Farhang Heydari (formerly at Neufeld Scheck) and

Elizabeth Cabraser (Partner at Lief Cabraser) had relevant classes (Civil Rights Litigation and Complex Litigation, respectively) in the 2017-2018 academic year.

- Focus on clinics, externships, and lawyering classes that will help you develop the practical litigation skills most relevant to the work you want to pursue. If you are interested in prisoner's rights, consider the Mass Incarceration Clinic. If you are interested in labor and employment, consider the Low-Wage Worker Externship. If you are not sure exactly the area you want to focus on, feel confident in taking any of the classes that develop litigation skills, from Trial Practice and Negotiation to the U.S. Attorney Externship, the Environment Law Clinic, or Bronx Defender Externship.
- Consider essential black letter law classes such as Evidence, Federal Courts, Administration, Criminal Adjudication, and classes in your civil rights areas of interest.
- Talk to [Tory Messina](#) throughout the process.