



HOW DO I TRANSITION FROM A JOB AT A LAW FIRM TO ONE IN PUBLIC INTEREST OR GOVERNMENT?

It is possible to transition from being an associate at a law firm to working at a public interest or government job; like all such career transitions, it requires work and careful planning. Preparation, planning, and work *while you are in law school* and *while you are at the firm* are necessary to make yourself an attractive candidate. Your ability to transition also depends on the kind of public interest or government work you are seeking and the degree to which the skills and knowledge you have developed while at law school and the law firm are relevant to the position you want to move into.

Below we provide a checklist of items that you will need to think about and work on to prepare for such a move. In addition, we advise you to work closely with the alumni advisors at Social Justice Initiatives (SJI) and the Office of Career Services (OCS) to plan your exit strategy.

While in school:

- Focus on the classes/coursework most relevant to where you want to be in the long term, including clinics and externships.
- Focus on student activities, organizations, and leadership roles relevant to where you want to be in the long term.
- Consult the new SJI “Roadmapping” document (and the SJI *Public Interest Job Search Toolkit*) for tips on building up your experience and developing a strong resume. Work with an SJI advisor to do this.
- Build relationships with public interest and government professors.
- Build relationships with practitioners through internships, pro bono work, externships, and other experiential learning opportunities.
- Request informational interviews with practitioners and Columbia Law School alumni during the term and during your summers. Stay in touch afterwards.
- Start having conversations now about what it takes to land in your future field. Begin to develop an “exit strategy.”
- Meet with the Financial Aid Office before graduation so you understand what you need to do and how much you need to be paying on your loans if you want to receive LRAP in a few years.
- Meet with your SJI Advisor to tailor a plan for your long-term goals.

What to ask/learn about firms during EIP and your summer:

If you are going to the private sector, it is important that you choose your law firm carefully. Law firms can vary widely. Talk to an OCS advisor (or the SJI Pro Bono Director) for recommendations about which law firms would be the most supportive of pro bono work; which firms have good work/life balance (which will enable you to have time to build public interest credentials and to job hunt); and which will allow you to build your target lawyering skills. You should also consider the firm’s culture

and its areas of practice, as these will be important additional considerations for your success at the firm. These are all important pieces of information in selecting which firms to bid on for EIP.

Additionally, you should ask some of the below questions during “second look” interviews and during your summer at the law firm, in consultation with OCS:

- As a summer associate, are there split-summer options with public interest organizations or government agencies? Does the firm have a special summer fellowship (like the Akin Pro Bono Scholars program)?
- As an associate, will you be able to choose your department (i.e., litigation, real estate, tax), or does the firm choose for you?
- As an associate, will you be able to develop skills relevant to your future public interest or government work?
 - For example, will you gain experience in: Client counseling? Research and writing? Drafting? Oral advocacy? Project management?
 - Are there opportunities for policy-focused work?
- What substantive work does an associate typically do?
 - Note that the legal issues you work on at a firm may be an impediment to transitioning to work on the “other side” of that issue in the future. For example, if you are in the employment group at the firm representing private sector companies, you may have difficulty transitioning to labor/employment work on behalf of plaintiff employees or unions; or if you do environmental work at the firm defending private sector companies, you may not be able to secure environmental work at a nonprofit or government enforcement agency. Know before you commit to a firm practice what *your* target employers value and what they think about the “other side.”
- How does the firm treat junior attorneys?
 - What skills does the firm develop and support in their junior associates? Are there opportunities for committee leadership at the firm or elsewhere?
 - What level of responsibility will you have as a junior attorney?
- What are the opportunities for growth and mentorship?
- How does the pro bono program actually work?
 - Does the firm “count” pro bono hours towards billing targets? Is there a cap?
 - What type of pro bono does the firm do? Is there a pro bono coordinator? If not, how is the program run? How do associates learn about opportunities? Are first-year associates eligible for participation?
 - How many of your target skills or client populations or issues will you actually be able to focus on, and how substantially?
 - Which nonprofit organizations does the firm partner with? Do junior associates get to interface with attorneys at partner organizations (to build relationships)?
 - What if an associate has specific interests--could s/he bring pro bono projects to the firm? If “yes,” will these projects be supported and valued?
- Does the firm provide other opportunities to “mix” with advocacy organizations (e.g., sponsoring tables at fundraising galas, inviting organizations to do lunchtime presentations or to sponsor trainings, promoting bar events, etc.)?

Also, please review the SJI & OCS Guide [“Assessing a Law Firm’s Commitment to Pro Bono”](#) (under “Public Interest Career Resources”) for more questions to ask about pro bono.

Tips for once you start a postgraduate position in big law:

- Live on the budget for the job you want, not the job you have. This includes NOT getting the apartment you can currently afford, but living as if you earn a public interest or government salary now.
- Focus on building professional skills that both the firm and the future job value.
- Continue to build up your public interest or government credentials. Do pro bono work. Bring pro bono opportunities to the firm in areas you are interested in. Don’t wait for interesting opportunities to cross your desk.
- Take advantage of any opportunities at the firm to “mix” with advocacy organizations in fields you are interested in.
- Continue to build your relationships with public interest practitioners and expand your experience. Here are some ways you can do this:
 - Do pro bono work in the field in which you are interested and make an effort to shine so the practitioners you are working take note. Ask them to meet for coffee or a meal. Indicate your interest in doing ‘extra.’ Ask them to introduce you to other practitioners. Ask them to keep you updated on job openings and/or other pro bono opportunities.
 - Join local or state bar association committees in the public interest fields in which you are interested. Be active. Attend meetings and social events. Take leadership roles. Participate in substantive projects.
 - Join national legal organizations like the American Constitution Society, National Legal Aid & Defender Association, or national bar associations like the ABA or affinity bar associations (like APALSA, NAPABA, BLSA, etc.). Attend annual meetings. Join committees and take leadership roles. Explore opportunities for networking or building your knowledge of public interest or lawyering topics or pro bono work. Participate in state chapters (if applicable).
 - Explore joining legal committees or boards of organizations in fields of interest. Make sure these are not only fundraising commitments but will expose you to substantive areas of law. Get to know staff and leadership of the organization and learn deeply about issues on which they work.
 - Explore opportunities to assist advocacy organizations or efforts in your fields of interest.
- Stay connected to the communities you hope to serve, including by building your language skills and connecting with non-legal volunteer work on weekends/vacations, especially if you cannot connect through related pro bono work at your firm.
- Write about the issues you care about for legal blogs or other legal publications. Demonstrate continued interest and knowledge in a practice area however you can.
- Stay connected with Columbia Law School. Keep in touch with your clinic and externship professors who know your public interest skills, values, and goals. Volunteer for panels or other opportunities that will bring you back to the school.
- Stay in touch with alumni counselors at SJI and OCS. Work with them to plan your exit strategy and meet alumni in fields of interest. Request mock interviews before any job interviews.

- Know how long to stay at the firm. The sooner you transition from the firm having achieved your objectives there, the better. The longer you are at a firm, the harder it may be to transition, with some exceptions. Speak with an SJI Advisor.