

Legal Pathways: Public Interest Law

USD Law Office of Career and Professional Development

Public Interest law offers a dynamic and diverse legal practice whether it be at a nonprofit organization, legal service provider, and/or government agency. Follow the strategic steps below to prepare for a career in Public Interest law, and remember that the Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD) is here to assist you.

What is Public Interest Law?

Public interest law is the practice of law to further interests shared by the entire public or significant segments of it. The clients and issues handled by a public interest lawyer reflect broad areas of public concern, such as discrimination, environmental protection, incarceration, child welfare, disability rights, health care coverage, domestic violence, and homelessness. Public interest law is grounded in the idea that the amount of money a person or entity can afford to spend on an attorney should not determine the amount of justice that person or entity receives.

What Type of Law Do Public Interest Lawyers Practice?

Their work spans across a wide variety of issue areas, including social and environmental justice, racial equality, veterans' rights, immigrants' rights, children's rights, affordable housing, homelessness issues, reproductive justice, health law, domestic violence, and more.

Sample Areas of Law:

✓ Consumer Rights	✓ Public Benefits	✓ Future Generations
✓ Civil Rights	✓ Immigration	✓ Reproductive Rights
✓ Children's Rights	✓ Administrative law	✓ Policy/Legislation
✓ Education Law	✓ Int'l Human Rights	✓ Transgender Rights
✓ Public Health	✓ Employment Law	✓ Community Safety
✓ Disability	✓ LGBTQ Rights	✓ Antitrust Law
✓ Elderly	✓ Housing	✓ Discrimination
✓ Energy	✓ Race Equity	✓ Economic Dev't
✓ Environment	✓ Taxpayers	
✓ Criminal Defense	✓ Workers	

Law Career Paths

The paths a public interest lawyer may take are numerous. Here are a few examples:

Civil Litigation:

Many public interest lawyers are litigators who focus on civil legal issues. These lawyers may work for a federal or state office of civil rights or the office of attorney general, enforcing civil laws that prohibit discrimination. Others work for nonprofit organizations or federally funded legal aid organizations that focus on specific legal issues, such as environmental law, or specific populations, such as homeless individuals.

Criminal Litigation:

Many public interest lawyers are litigators who focus on criminal legal issues. They provide high quality legal representation to individuals charged with crimes at public defender offices and federal defender offices. Many prosecute cases on behalf of communities and victims of crimes at district attorney offices, offices of the attorney general, and other governmental offices. See OCPD's Legal Pathways: Criminal Law.

Civil Transactional:

Public interest lawyers may assist low-income clients or small nonprofit entities by providing transactional assistance in various areas of law, including estate planning for low-income elderly clients through a federally funded legal aid organization or a state funded elder law nonprofit organization. Others provide employment law or contract assistance for small nonprofit organizations through a nonprofit legal organization or bar association program.

Policy Work:

Public interest attorneys often play a major role in improving laws that protect vulnerable individuals by drafting legislation and/or regulations, and advocating before all three branches of government to ensure the interests of the public are adequately protected by new policy. These attorneys may work in the office of a legislator, an administrative agency, a nonprofit organization, for a lobbying organization, at a think tank, or in a government office.

[How Do I Become a Public Interest Lawyer?](#)

All public interest lawyers get their start in law school, and many of their careers are launched based on connections made through externships, law school clinics, and public interest law groups!

USD Law has served as the training ground for generations of social justice-minded public interest lawyers. USD law students launch their social justice careers by externing in the public interest realm during the academic year and summers where they are mentored by and work side-by-side with experienced, well-known public interest attorneys. Many of these students who remain dedicated to public interest law go on to accept employment, often through fellowships, with these organizations. They provide the poorest and most vulnerable of our communities with access to justice and quality legal representation.

[Your Job Search Strategy: Where to Start](#)

Step 1: Make an Appointment with the Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD):

The OCPD professionals will use their knowledge and experience to help you create a personalized job search strategy, review your public interest law resume and cover letter, develop yourself professionally by perfecting your elevator pitch and networking skills, and prepare you for interviews. Imagine how much easier it will be to apply for jobs when you have your materials ready, and you can present yourself as an aspiring public interest lawyer. TIP: *Sign up for a counseling appointment on #HireUSDLaw.*

In addition to the OCPD, check out <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/> and <https://www.psjd.org/> and review them regularly. In addition to #HireUSDLaw, they should be your primary sources for public interest law related questions, externships tips, grant funding sources, post-graduate opportunities, fellowships, and public service loan forgiveness.

Step 2: Take part in Public Interest Career Fairs and Events!

Students interested in public interest law should attend as many public interest fairs and events as possible, including USD Law's annual Careers in the Law event and these two annual public interest/public sector fairs:

Equal Justice Works Annual Conference and Career Fair – October of each year

Location: Washington D.C.

Equal Justice Works is a nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a just society by mobilizing the next generation of lawyers committed to equal justice. Its annual career fair is held in October and serves as the nation's largest public interest career fair. USD's Public Interest Law Foundation (PILF) and the law school help fund the travel/attendance expenses for 2Ls and 3Ls who have demonstrated a commitment to public interest/public sector work. To apply to employers attending this career fair, visit <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/>. To secure funding through USD Law to attend the career fair, please contact OCPD in early fall. The OCPD sends out an email to the public interest student associations regarding this Career Fair early each fall.

Southern California Public Interest Career Day – February of each year

Location: UCLA

Public Interest Career Day is the Southern California law schools' public interest/public sector career fair held each February at UCLA School of Law. 1Ls, 2Ls, and 3Ls have the opportunity to interview with public interest and public sector employers for summer and postgraduate positions. The OCPD sends out an email to students regarding this Career Fair before Winter Break every year.

Step 3: Take Relevant Coursework, Pursue a Concentration, and Earn USD Law's Pro Bono Service Certificate

See Appendix A for a sample of public interest courses. USD Law provides theoretical and practical training for aspiring public interest attorneys. USD Law's concentrations will not only help prepare you for a career in public interest law, earning one will make you more marketable:

- [Public Interest Law](#)
- [International Law](#)
- [Children's Rights](#)
- [Civil Litigation](#)
- [Criminal Litigation](#)
- [Employment and Labor Law](#)
- [Environmental and Energy Law](#)
- [Health Law](#)

TIP: *Plan ahead. Review the available classes (they may not be offered each semester). Meet with an academic advisor in Law Student Affairs to ensure you make room in your schedule for the courses required for the concentration.*

USD Law's Pro Bono Service Certificate recognizes the pro bono service of students who have completed a minimum of 100 hours of pro bono legal service while in law school. In addition to receiving the Pro Bono Service Certificate, students receive a white cord to wear at commencement and a listing in the annual honors brochure. Review the requirements [here](#).

Step 4: Join Clubs and Organizations On-Campus and Off-Campus

Joining USD Law's public interest clubs and groups, including [Pro Bono Legal Advocates](#) and [Public Interest Law Foundation](#), that focus on practice areas you wish to pursue, as well as off-campus events held by local attorney associations, is both productive and enriching.

Public Interest Law Foundation (PILF)

PILF educates USD students about public interest careers and volunteer opportunities and encourages students and alumni to support public interest law through volunteerism and donations. Members of PILF conduct an annual pledge drive to raise funds for USD's Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) and they help promote student attendance at the Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair. PILF also sponsors educational events and seminars on public interest issues and opportunities.

Pro Bono Legal Advocates (PBLA)

PBLA is an organization dedicated to bringing legal assistance to those in the local community who would otherwise be lost in the legal system or who might not be able to afford competent counsel. PBLA also sponsors programs that are not specifically law-oriented for those who want to volunteer in the local community. Current programs include AIDS legal clinics, guardianships, domestic violence prevention, and working with organizations serving youth.

By getting involved with these groups and others, you will meet other public interest students with similar interests as well as USD Law alumni and other lawyers who are currently working in the field. You will gain exposure to the latest legal issues and happenings. You will meet a network of potential mentors who can share their wisdom and possible public interest law job openings with you. Volunteering at club meetings, receptions, conferences, and events is also a way to take a break from your studies, enjoy a little social time, and build your professional relationships.

Step 4: Get to Know your Public Interest Law Faculty:

Identify and make an appointment to speak with USD Law professors and clinical attorneys on campus who teach areas of law that relate to your public interest law career goals, such as criminal law, employment and labor law, health law, immigration law, or international law. They may have practiced in the field and are very knowledgeable about the industry. Because each area of law encompasses a variety of different industries and legal issues, your professors

can help you narrow down your interest and guide you in the right direction. See Appendix A for a list of public interest law faculty.

Step 5: Gain Practical, Hands-On Experience in Public Interest Law:

Law clerk positions, clinical opportunities and externships for academic credit allow you to gain real world legal experience as a student. Take the opportunity after your first year to obtain hands-on skills and practice, while demonstrating to future employers your proactive dedication and qualifications for summer and post-graduate work. Doing so will also boost your confidence, gaining professional experience that will be of value to employers.

On-Campus: The following on-campus opportunities provide students with legal experience and academic credit, see Appendix A and visit USD Law's website for information about applying:

- **[Centers for Public Interest Law:](#)** The Centers for Public Interest Law (CPIL), based at the University of San Diego School of Law, protect and promote underrepresented populations and areas of public concern: consumer interests, children's rights, and energy/climate policy. The Consumer Protection Policy Center (CPPC), Children's Advocacy Institute (CAI), and Energy Policy Initiatives Center (EPIC) do this by educating and training the next generation of public interest attorneys; performing research and providing public education to inform USD Law students, policymakers, advocates, and the public; and, in the case of CPPC and CAI, engaging in policy advocacy such as legislative and regulatory advocacy and impact litigation. For more information, please visit the websites for each of CPIL's three centers and institutes.
- **[Consumer Protection Policy Center:](#)** Students take a one-semester class entitled [California Regulatory Law and Public Interest \(CRL\)](#). In the class, students learn the substantive law governing the operation and decision making of state regulatory agencies. They study the "sunshine statutes" which require most agency decisions to be made in public, and constitutional and other limitations on the regulatory authority of administrative agencies. Students are also encouraged to take the [California Regulatory Law Clinic](#), in which they monitor state agencies and periodically report on their actions, which are published. As a follow-up in their third year, students who took CRL may enroll in [Public Interest Law Clinic](#), and engage in advanced advocacy projects involving active participation in rulemaking, litigation, legislation, and/or writing.
- **[Children's Advocacy Institute:](#)** The Children's Advocacy Institute is one of the nation's premiere academic, research, and advocacy organizations working to improve the lives of children and youth, with special emphasis on improving the child protection and foster care systems and enhancing resources that are available to youth aging out of foster care. Students who have completed or are taking [Child Rights and Remedies](#) are eligible to participate in the [Child Advocacy Clinic](#), a unique program that gives law students experience in representing children and/or working on policy issues vital to children's interests. The Child Advocacy Clinic offers three different clinical opportunities: Dependency Clinic, Delinquency/At-Risk Youth Clinic, and Policy Clinic.
- **[USD Law Clinics:](#)** The USD School of Legal Clinics provide training to upper-level law students while providing needed legal services to the community.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Appellate Clinic✓ Civil Clinic✓ Education & Disability Clinic✓ Entrepreneurship Clinic✓ Federal Tax Clinic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Immigration Clinic✓ State Income Tax Clinic—California✓ State Sales and Use Tax—California✓ Veterans Clinic✓ Workers' Rights Clinic
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Off-Campus: The Field Placement/Externship Program allows students to receive academic credit for part-time legal work performed under the supervision of an attorney at approved placement sites. This type of opportunity is called an externship. In addition to hands-on work at the placement sites, students enroll in a faculty taught course designed to enhance the placement experience. Students are able to work with a wide variety of employers and in a range of practice areas. Students can work as an extern at a government agency, a non-profit organization, a corporation, company, or a business entity. Field Placements in public interest areas are available through the following:

- [Washington DC Externships \(Fall or Summer\)](#)
- [Agency Externships \(Fall, Spring, or Summer\)](#)

Post-Graduate: For post-graduation opportunities, several excellent resources on postgraduate fellowships are available in the Office of Career and Professional Development and [#HireUSDLaw's Resource Library](#). Applications deadlines may be as early as September of a student's third year of law school.

Step 6: Build Relationships (Network!) with Alumni and other Public Interest Lawyers:

Search for and connect with USD Law alumni currently working in public interest law. Check the Alumni Network Directory in the Resource Library in [#HireUSDLaw](#) and conduct an attorney search on Google, Martindale Hubbell, Lexis, and Westlaw. Attend public interest law organization events to meet many other lawyers practicing in the field. Introduce yourself as an aspiring public interest lawyer and start building professional relationships. Review the networking guides on [#HireUSDLaw](#) to gain tips on how to effectively network. Reach out and arrange informational interviews to learn about their work and journey to a career in public interest law.

TIP: Get organized and keep a spreadsheet of each person in your network, making future follow-up easier. Make a goal to contact several people a week for informational interviews or to attend networking events. Set reminders to stay on track.

Step 7: Be a Strategic Job Searcher:

If you followed Steps 1–6, then hopefully this final step will be much easier for you. You are more likely to discover unique job opportunities through your knowledge, experience, and network of public interest law professionals. We recommend that you also conduct a targeted independent job search.

1. **Online job search:** View job postings on [#HireUSDLaw](#), <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/> and <https://www.psjd.org/>. Conduct a separate search for jobs in the specific industry in which you

are interested (e.g., environmental law or housing law). Many employers offer internship and employment opportunities on their career websites. If they do not list jobs, contact their human resources department and ask about possible openings. You would be surprised at how many employers simply do not post their positions online.

2. **Leverage your personal background:** Your interest in public interest law likely comes from personal/professional experience with an issue or with working with a specific community. Use it to your advantage as you network, connect with colleagues, and draft cover letters.
3. **Be prepared to move geographically:** Some cities are better job markets for obtaining highly-competitive, entry-level public interest law positions. For example, there are a limited number of nonprofit organizations that provide civil legal assistance in San Diego County, and those positions are often filled with experienced legal aid or poverty attorneys. However, there is a need for highly qualified, public interest attorneys in rural areas and after one or two years of practice, an attorney will be more marketable in the competitive San Diego market. It is best to keep an open mind about possibly having to move for that dream job.
4. **Be patient with yourself and diligent with your search:** Searching for a summer job or post-graduation position is a lot of work and requires patience. Don't lose your momentum in reaching out to new contacts and those with whom you have already created a relationship. Keep looking, cast a wider net for different, yet relevant, jobs and stay diligent in your search. If you feel you have hit a wall or need new ideas, OCPD is always available to meet with you to brainstorm new strategies.
5. **Search also for “stepping stone” opportunities:** Remember that public interest law is a niche legal area, but it encompasses a wide variety of legal practice. Accordingly, keep an eye out for positions that may not necessarily be in your area of interest but will still teach you the relevant skills and give you experience for a successful public interest law career. It may take time, but as long as you are gaining relevant experience at your job, you are still making it possible to secure your dream job in public interest law.

APPENDIX A: Public Interest Law

- I. USD Law Courses, Legal Opportunities, and Professors
- II. Public Interest Organizations/Agencies in San Diego
- III. Funding Sources/Financial Assistance for Public Interest Positions

I. USD Law Courses, Legal Opportunities, and Professors

Sample Courses:

- [Administrative Law](#)
- [Antitrust](#)
- [California Regulatory Law and Public Interest](#)
- [Child Rights and Remedies](#)
- [Civil Rights Theory Seminar](#)
- [Discrimination Law and Diversity](#)
- [Employment Discrimination](#)

Employment Law
Environmental Law
Federal Courts
Human Rights Advocacy
Immigration Clinic I
Immigration Clinic II
Immigration Law
International Human Rights
Legislation
Legislation in the Modern Administrative State
Public International Law
Remedies
Securities Regulation
Transitional Justice and Responding to Mass Atrocities
Veterans Clinic
Work Law and Policy (previously named Work, Welfare, and Justice)

Law Clinics:

Visit [USD Law](#) for more information:

Appellate Clinic	Application
CA Regulatory Law Clinic	Contact Katie Gonzalez
Child Advocacy Clinic	Contact Elisa Weichel
Civil Clinic	Application
Education and Disability Clinic	Application
Energy Law and Policy Clinic	Contact Scott Anders
Entrepreneurship Clinic	Application
Federal Tax Clinic	Application
Immigration Clinic	Application
Public Interest Law Clinic	Contact Katie Gonzalez
State Income Tax Clinic—California	Application
State Sales and Use Tax—California	Application
Veterans Clinic	Application
Workers' Rights	Application

Externships:

[Washington DC Externship](#)

The Washington DC Externship is a unique educational experience that enables students to work in a semester-long externship in Washington, D.C. Under the supervision of an on-site attorney, students work for a government or public interest agency, non-profit trade association, think-tank or with a judge. Students can earn from 12-15 units per semester. View more detailed information on the [DC Externship program](#) web page.

[Agency Externship](#)

The Agency Externship Program allows students to receive academic credit for legal work with a government agency or non-profit organization. Students must work during the academic session for a minimum of 50 hours per unit of credit and may receive 1-4 units for their work at a placement. For purposes of Agency Externship work, the academic session is from the official start of classes to the last day of final exams. Any externship work outside this time period may be counted towards pro bono hours, but not for academic credit. If students have previously been placed in an Agency Externship, they can register for Agency Externship II. More information [here](#).

Faculty (all faculty biographies can be found [here](#)):

Child Advocacy/Children's Rights: Professor Robert Fellmeth
Child Advocacy/Children's Rights: Professor Jessica Heldman
Civil Rights: Professor Roy L. Brooks, Professor Gail Heriot
Consumer Law: Professor Robert C. Fellmeth, Professor Orly Lobel
Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure: Professor Lawrence Alexander, Professor Kevin Cole,
Professor Donald Dripps, Professor Dov Fox, Professor Jean Ramirez, Professor
Maimon Schwarzschild
Debtor/Creditor Law: Professor Adam Hirsh, Professor Mary Jo Wiggins
Education and Disability Law: Professor Margaret A. Dalton
Employment and Labor Law: Professor Roy L. Brooks, Professor Gail Heriot, Professor Orly
Lobel, Professor Miranda Oshige McGowan
Employment Discrimination: Professor Roy L. Brooks, Professor Orly Lobel, Professor
Miranda Oshige McGowan
Environmental Law: Professor Michael B. Rappaport
Health Law: Professor Margaret A. Dalton and Professor Dov Fox
Non-Profit Law: Professor Miranda Perry Fleischer, Clinical Administrative Director Eric Austin
Public Interest/Public Law and Regulation: Professor Roy L. Brooks, Professor Robert C.
Fellmeth, Professor Orly Lobel, Professor Michael B. Rappaport
Public International Law: Professor Maimon Schwarzschild
Veteran's Law: Professor Robert F. Muth

II. **Public Interest Organizations/Agencies in San Diego**

Below is a sample of public interest organizations and agencies in San Diego County.
Organizations that currently take students through our Agency Externship Program are indicated

with an asterisk (*). Organizations that do not have an asterisk currently take students as volunteers but may be willing to take students through our Agency Externship Program; please speak to the OCPD about this. *See #HireUSDLaw's Resource Library for the descriptions and complete contact information for these Public Interest Agencies in San Diego.* For opportunities outside of San Diego County, please visit #HireUSDLaw and www.PSJD.org. PSJD has a comprehensive listing of over 11,000 public interest/public service organizations throughout the nation and world. It offers current information on a broad range of opportunities for law students and attorneys. Subscription fees are paid by USD, students need to register and indicate USD as their school.

ABA Immigration Justice Project* - <http://www.americanbar.org/ijp>
Access, Inc.* - www.access2jobs.org
American Civil Liberties Union Foundation (ACLU) - www.aclusandiego.org
Appellate Defenders Inc. - www.adi-sandiego.com
California Indian Legal Services - www.calindian.org
California Innocence Project - <https://californiainnocenceproject.org/>
California Office of Attorney General* - <https://oag.ca.gov/>
California Rural Legal Assistance - www.crla.org
Casa Cornelia* - www.casacornelia.org
Catholic Charities - www.ccdsd.org
Center for Community Solutions - www.ccssd.org
Children's Legal Services of San Diego - <https://www.clssandiego.org/>
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) - www.cair.com
Dependency Legal Services - (619) 398-2727
Disability Rights California* - www.disabilityrightsca.org
Elder Law and Advocacy* - www.seniorlaw-sd.org
Employee Rights Center - <http://weberc.net/>
Fair Housing Council of San Diego - www.fhcsd.com
Family Law Facilitator's Office, Superior Court of California* - www.sandiego.courts.ca.gov/
Federal Defenders of San Diego Inc.* - <https://fdsdi.com/>
Housing Opportunities Collaborative* - www.housingcollaborative.org
Immigration Center For Women and Children (ICWC)* - www.icwclaw.org
Independent Voter Network* - <http://ivn.us>
Invisible Children - www.invisiblechildren.com
Jewish Family Services* - www.jfssd.org
Legal Aid Society of San Diego* - www.lassd.org
New Media Rights* - www.newmediarights.org
Privacy Rights Clearinghouse Inc. - www.privacyrights.org
San Diego Coastkeeper* - www.sdcoastkeeper.org
San Diego County District Attorney's Office* - <http://www.scdca.org/>
San Diego Homeless Court - <http://www.homelesscourtprogram.com/>
San Diego Housing Commission - www.sdhc.org
San Diego Public Defender Office* - http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/public_defender/
San Diego Teen Court - <http://urlm.co/www.sdteencourt.org>
San Diego Volunteer Lawyer Program* - www.sdvlp.org/volunteer/
Sierra Club - <http://sandiego.sierraclub.org/home/index.asp>
Southwest Center For Asian Pacific American Law - www.scapal.org
Voices For Children – Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) - www.voices4children.com

YWCA Domestic Violence Services Legal Advocacy Project* - www.ywcasandiego.org

III. Funding Sources/Financial Assistance for Public Interest Positions

There are numerous ways in which a student can secure funding for public interest and public sector positions; below are a few. For additional information on funding sources, please contact the Office of Career and Professional Development.

Summer Internships (San Diego and Nationwide)

- **Nonprofit Work Opportunity.** Grants are awarded to students who will be working at non-governmental public interest agencies during the summer. The grant amount varies from year to year (in past years, students received \$5,000). To apply for the funding, the student must obtain a commitment for summer employment from an organization or agency and then complete the application form, which will be available in the Financial Aid Office during the spring semester. Please note that this grant funding is limited, and therefore, not all eligible students can be funded.
- **USD Off-Campus Federal Work Study.** Work study awards may be available to eligible students who will work for non-profit or government (including judicial) agencies. Applicants must file a FAFSA application, demonstrate financial need, and be Federal Work Study eligible. Funding is dependent on availability of federal funds.
- **Dan Bradley Summer Fellowship.** This grant is available to students who have secured a placement at qualified legal services agencies (visit www.laaonline.org to learn more). Past students received a \$3,500 award.
- **Equal Justice Works (EJW) Summer Corp.** This is a program through EJW where students who spent the summer working for a public interest agency receive funding (\$1,230 in past years). For more information, go to <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org>.
- There are also numerous Summer Grant or Fellowship Programs sponsored by various organizations, bar associations, companies, and agencies. For more information on such programs, please visit www.psjd.org and the Resources Library of #HireUSDLaw, or contact the OCPD.

Attorney Positions

- **Fellowship Information.** There are numerous fellowships available to fund work in the public interest sector. These fellowships may fund one or more years of work in public interest organization, which often leads to a full-time staff position with the organization. These fellowships are competitive, and students should discuss the process with the OCPD during their 2L year or very early in their 3L year. More information can be found at www.psjd.org and in the Resources Library of #HireUSDLaw, or speak to the OCPD.
- **Loan Repayment and Assistance Program (LRAP).** Available to graduates who meet funding criteria. Visit <http://www.sandiego.edu/law/financial-aid/loan-repay-debt-management/lrap/>.
- **Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program.** Forgives the remaining balance on your Direct Loans after you have made 120 qualifying monthly payments under a qualifying repayment plan while working for qualifying employers.
<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service>