# How Do I Transition from a Job at a Law Firm to One in Public Interest or Government?

It is possible to transition from working at a law firm to a public interest or government job. Like any career transition, it will take work, preparation, and careful planning. You will need to **lay the groundwork *while you are in law school* and continue *while you are at the firm*** to make yourself an attractive candidate to public sector employers.

Below we provide checklists of things to consider at various stages of your career to prepare you for a move to public interest work. We advise you to work closely with the advisers at the Office of Public Interest/Public Service Law and Careers (PI/PS Office) and the Office of Private Sector Careers (OPSC) to plan your career transition strategy.

## While in law school, stay focused on your long-term public interest goals.

- Identify the type of public interest work you hope to eventually practice.
- Focus on the classes/coursework (including clinics and externships) most relevant to where you want to work in the long term. If you do not know exactly which substantive areas you might wish to switch to, try to get a broad range of skills on any issues that interest you.
- Get involved in relevant student activities and organizations. Take on leadership roles.
- Consult the PI/PS Office's Your Public Interest Roadmap and Public Interest Job Search Toolkit for tips on building your experience and developing a strong resume. Work with a PI/PS adviser to discuss strategy.
- Build relationships with public interest/government professors and practitioners (through internships, pro bono work, externships, and other experiential learning opportunities).
  - Request informational interviews with practitioners and Columbia Law School alumni. Stay in touch.
  - Use the networking tracking sheet to create a record of your conversations. Use the Public Interest Job Search Toolkit for sample emails to use when networking and questions to ask.
  - Start having conversations now about what it takes to land in your desired field in the future. Begin to develop your transition strategy.
- Meet with the Financial Aid Office before graduation so you understand what you need to do if you want to receive LRAP in a few years.

## During the summer recruiting process:

- Choose the law firms you bid on or apply to carefully. Law firms vary widely.

- Talk to an OPSC adviser for recommendations on which law firms are the most supportive of pro bono work, which firms may best afford you the time to build public interest credentials and network, and which will allow you to build your target lawyering skills.
    - Note: It is probably best to wait until after you receive an offer to delve too deeply into learning about a firm's pro bono commitment, but you can certainly raise questions about pro bono work during a callback interview. When asking questions, please be mindful that a firm is ultimately hiring you to do billable work. If you receive an offer and have the opportunity to schedule a second look, ask if you can speak with an attorney who does pro bono or with someone who coordinates the pro bono program.
- Learn about how different firms assign work, support associate professional development and training, and credit and manage pro bono assignments.
- Look into whether a firm allows split-summer options with public interest organizations or government agencies, and if the firm has a special summer fellowship.

## Once you secure an offer and are deciding whether to accept a summer associate or full-time associate position, consider:

- Do associates choose their department (i.e., litigation, real estate, tax), or are they assigned a practice group?
- Will you have the opportunity to develop skills relevant to your future public interest or government work (client counseling, research and writing, drafting, oral advocacy, project management)?
- How does the firm support the professional development of junior attorneys?
- 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?
- 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 a firm defending private sector companies, you may have difficulty securing environmental work at a nonprofit or government enforcement agency. Know before you commit to a firm practice what your target employers value.
- How does the pro bono program 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?
    - How many of your target skills or client populations/issues will you be able to focus on, and how substantially?
    - Which nonprofit organizations does the firm partner with? Do junior associates get to work directly with attorneys at partner organizations to build relationships?
    - Can an associate bring pro bono projects to the firm?
    - Please review Assessing a Law Firm's Commitment to Pro Bono on the PI/PS Office job search tools page for more questions to ask about pro bono.

- Are there opportunities to work with public interest or government lawyers (e.g., bar committee engagement or other opportunities to collaborate beyond pro bono work)?

## For attorneys working in big law:

***Please note*:** Be mindful that the more you get involved in public service, the more you may inadvertently be signaling to your firm that you are considering leaving. Also, we understand that associates are very busy and that it might seem daunting to add more to your to-do list. To make the transition to public interest or government work, consider doing as many of the following as you can, and please reach out to a PI/PS Office adviser for additional guidance and support.

- Live on the budget for the job you want, not the job you have. Live as if you earn a public interest or government salary now to ensure you have the financial freedom needed to make a transition to public interest/government work.
- Focus on building professional skills that both your firm and any future job would value.
- Continue to build your public interest or government credentials and build your network.
    - Do pro bono work in the field in which you are interested. If possible, reach out to your firm's pro bono director with ideas for new opportunities.
    - Network with practitioners at nonprofit organizations. Ask them to keep you updated on job openings and/or other pro bono opportunities.
    - Take an active role in local or state bar association committees and national legal organizations.
    - Consider 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.
    - Explore opportunities to assist advocacy organizations or efforts.
- Stay connected to the communities you hope to serve, including by building your language skills. Fluency in relevant foreign languages can significantly enhance your appeal when you eventually apply for public interest positions.
- Write for legal blogs or publications.
- Stay connected with the Law School. Keep in touch with your clinic and externship professors and volunteer for panels or other opportunities that will bring you back to campus.
- Work with alumni advisers at PI/PS and OPSC to plan your next steps and meet alumni in fields of interest. Schedule a mock interview before doing any job interviews.
- Know how long to stay at the firm. The ideal time may vary depending on your public sector career goals and the hiring practices of target organizations. To address the best timing given your desired path, please speak with a PI/PS Office adviser.