Columbia Law School

PI/PS
Office of Public Interest/
Public Service Law and Careers

Public Interest/Civil Rights Law Firms: FAQs

What is a public interest/civil rights law firm?

Public interest/civil rights law firms[1] are mission-driven private law practices. These firms have a clear dedication to particular areas of civil rights practice and to the impacted clients and 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" and that it provides a chance to "advocate for a client" or act as a "private attorney general."[2]

Generally, public interest firms include their mission on their website, as well as cases that highlight their expertise and priorities. While some firms have a specific subject area (e.g., employment-related cases, Indian and tribal law, 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 focus on the needs of their clients and remain client-driven in all their work. All firms discussed in these FAQs and included in this resource chart (a list of public interest firms) have reputations for excellent legal work that impacts clients, 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:

- Focus on litigation
- Almost always represent plaintiffs and bring affirmative litigation
- Are smaller than "Big Law" firms (some employ as few as two or three practitioners, none more than 200)
- May focus on class action work or dedicate some portion of their practice to it
- Provide junior attorneys with a lot of responsibility in litigation right away

One main reason to work at a public interest/civil rights law firm is the opportunity to gain hands-on experience and 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 graduates at these firms felt that after two or three years, they 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.

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[1] Firms may call themselves "private public interest law firms," "public interest law firms," "civil rights law firms," 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 focused 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.

*NOTE: The inclusion of a firm in this list does not guarantee that it will qualify for Columbia Summer Funding (CSF) or the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP). Past eligibility for CSF and/or LRAP does not guarantee that a firm will qualify in the future. To verify a firm's current eligibility, contact CSFhelp@law.columbia.edu and/or LRAP@law.columbia.edu before applying or accepting an offer. For all other questions about this list, please contact Molly Griffard at *mg4860@columbia.edu*.

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 (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 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 described 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.

I'm thinking about a summer internship with a public interest/civil rights law firm. What do I need to do?

- Research firms and decide which ones have approaches and practices that interest you.
- Talk to students who interned at your target firm or type of firm *before you apply*.
- Talk to graduates who work or worked at your target firm or type of firm *before you apply*.
- Engage in public interest litigation opportunities through specialized moot courts, pro bono, Spring Break Caravans, practitioner-taught litigation classes, classes in your civil rights areas of interest, internships, externships, and clinics.
- Make sure you know each firm you apply to and craft cover letters to reflect that knowledge. Do not apply without a cover letter unless the firm directs applicants not to include one.
- 1Ls: Make sure you check that the firm hires 1Ls.
- 2Ls: Talk to graduates and other lawyers at target firms early in your 1L summer, and be prepared with applications starting in August of the preceding year.
- Apply to 15-20 employers, including a mix of firms and organizations engaged in litigation, such as direct legal service providers, impact nonprofits, and government agencies.
- Understand that not every firm will qualify for Columbia Summer Funding or LRAP and plan accordingly. If you expect to rely on either source of assistance, email CSFhelp@law.columbia.edu or LRAP@law.columbia.edu *before applying to firms*.
- Talk regularly with advisers at the Office of Public Interest/Public Service Law and Careers, including Molly Griffard specialist career adviser.

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