

## Public Interest Law

1. What is public interest law? What does it cover?

Public interest law is a legal profession that is interested more in helping out the public as opposed to private interests. Within that definition, the “public” could be a subset of the entire population such as children or it could actually be the entire public. It involves handling all issues that are of public interest, constitutional interest, not just personal property, usually issues directly tied to constitutional rights.

2. What does an attorney do who works in public interest law?

Public interest law covers all areas of law. The differences are that the services are either directed toward those who can't afford an attorney from a private firm, or toward the government. For example, some attorneys may work for the senate drafting laws for senators. Other might do work for the department of the interior working for the County Counsel. That work would include providing counsel to county officials and defending law suits related to the county.

3. What is an average day like for an attorney who practices public interest law?

There is a lot writing and editing. There is no average day. The work entails giving legal advice to clients, researching the constitutional impact of decisions the government makes. There can also be a lot of consultation and counsel regarding constitutional rights. Depending on what organization you work for you may be involved in some cases that actually go to court.

4. What is the average salary for an attorney who practices public interest law?

Typically lower than attorneys that work in other fields. Most start at around \$50,000. \$140,000 is the absolute peak, and that is at the end of your career. Anything above \$80,000 is good for a sole practitioner. If you're with a high end law firm, and if you're on the partnership track you'll start at around \$120,000.

5. Is there currently a demand for public interest law attorneys?

Yes. Anytime you have a sector of the community that pays less for something, there will be more demand for that thing. If people want to work in the legal profession, and they can start at \$100,000 or \$50,000, all other thing considered being the same, most people will choose the one where they will make more money. Some people get into this field for different reasons. Those who want to practice public interest law hope to make enough to support their family, but mostly they are seeking the lifestyle that is associated with a public interest attorney. The motivation is to help the public rather than simply to make more money.

6. Is there more of a demand for public interest law attorneys in one area of the country over another?

Yes, look for more populated areas, areas with greater government involvement, because public interest law is in large measure funded by the government. There are a lot of positions in Washington, D.C. for government organizations. Washington, D.C. is also the headquarters for a lot of national organizations. But you can find some positions, like public defender, anywhere. Public interest law is so broad that there are definitely positions anywhere in this field.

7. How difficult is it for students right out of law school to get a job in public interest law?

Not difficult. In fact, it's probably a little bit easier than getting a job with a private firm. Private firms are more selective, but they pay more.

8. In what type of a work situation can an attorney practice public interest law? Big firm? Small firm? Government work?

Most opportunities are with the government. Unless your with the ACLU, there is a very slim chance you will be working for a private entity. However, there are ways to work at any of the three.

9. What are the most rewarding things about practicing public interest law?

Doing the right thing. You'll feel like you've improved society as opposed to just filling your own pocket or the pocket of the partners who own the firm. Many LDS people are attracted to public interest law because they can actually retire and go on missions. In this field there is more time for your family, as opposed to the huge time demand of the partnership tracks for large firms. Those who get on that path usually end up going out on their own to have a little more control over their time.

10. What are the most difficult things about practicing public interest law?

The first four years you will starve. You've got loans and the pay is comparatively less than other fields.

11. For students who are interested in practicing public interest law, are there certain undergraduate classes they should take? Majors that are better? Minors that are better?

Political science and English are always good. Anything that will help you to write well and analyze is good. You need to be able to express yourself whether you're a trial or contract attorney. If you plan on working for the government, then political science is a good option. If you are interested in a certain field, for example health care, or elder law, you can major in those special public interests. If you can choose early, it will help you in the long run. Wherever you are interested in applying you'll need to convince the employer that you have a knowledge and interest in that particular field.

12. For students who are interested in practicing public interest law, would it be better to go to a school that holds itself out as having a specialty in public interest law or just the best ranked law school the student can get into?

No there aren't, you want the best one you can get into. Students should, however, consider specific journals that the university publishes. That is an important factor to consider when applying to a law school.

13. For students who are interested in practicing public interest law, are there certain law school classes they should take?

Not really. Family law classes, maybe.

14. For students who are interested in practicing public interest law is there anything else they should do to prepare themselves for that field of law?

Even before law school you should spend time working in that field. If you want to be a private attorney or a paralegal, then intern for a law firm. If you want to work for a non-profit organization then get a job with one, even if it's not paid. It will help you to see if you like it and convince employers to be interested in you. Get some experience in the field. The important thing is to 1) find out if you like it and 2) establish contacts in that field. If you intern it is highly recommend to go for politicians. Even if you are a gofer, the connections down the road can be very lucrative for anybody in government.

15. Other Comments

This can be an opportunity to make a difference where you are holding the government to the standard of the constitution.

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With References to The Official Guide to Legal Specialties – An Insider's Guide to Every Major Practice Area, by Lisa L. Abrams, J.D. 2000. Harcourt Legal & Professional Publications.