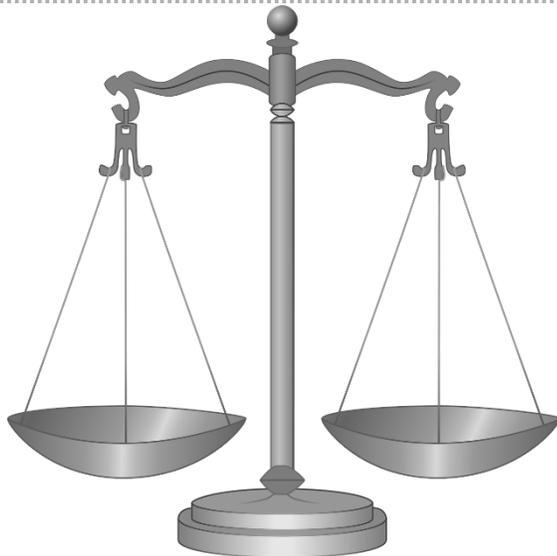


# Equal Justice Works

## What is Public Interest Law?

Public interest lawyers work for legal service providers, nonprofits, and government agencies that focus their practice on helping low-income, marginalized, or vulnerable populations. Their work spans across a wide variety of issue areas, including domestic violence, racial equality, veterans' rights, immigration, and more. All public interest lawyers get their start in law school, and Equal Justice Works wants to introduce you to the world of public interest law!



*For three decades Equal Justice Works has created opportunities for public interest lawyers committed to building a more just society. We believe that the poorest and most vulnerable among us deserve the same access to justice and quality legal representation as the privileged. To achieve this, we offer a continuum of opportunities for law students and lawyers that provide the training and skills that enable them to provide effective representation to underserved communities and causes.*

### The Big issue: Justice Gaps

Eighty percent of low-income Americans face heavy obstacles when trying to access the civil justice system to resolve legal issues like foreclosure, accessing disability benefits, or leaving an abusive marriage.

Many states are in the midst of an indigent defense funding crisis, leaving public defenders with overwhelming caseloads and daily challenges to providing the constitutional standard of legal representation.

Law students are in a prime position to help public interest lawyers provide legal aid and other low-cost legal help to an increasing number of clients in

need. Through law school programs, clinics, projects, courses, and internships, public interest law students can help close the justice gap.

## The Solution: Legal Aid & Indigent Defense Organizations

Legal aid and indigent defense organizations provide direct legal services to low-income clients for free or a very low cost. They practice different types of law, including but not limited to:

- Administrative law
- Children’s Rights
- Civil Rights
- Education Law
- Public Health
- Health Law
- Immigration
- Intellectual Property
- International Human Rights Law
- Adult & Juvenile Criminal Defense
- Employment Law
- LGBTQ Rights
- National Security
- Women’s Rights

## The Challenge: Funding Legal Services

### Legal Aid

Many legal aid and indigent defense organizations are struggling to maintain financial resources and operate on tight budgets. Financial support remains one of the largest barriers to addressing the legal needs of poor people.

Many civil legal aid organizations receive funding from the [Legal Services Corporation](#) (LSC), an independent nonprofit established by Congress in 1974 to provide financial support grants for civil legal aid to low-income Americans. LSC grantees serve thousands of low-income clients in every congressional district, and are the only source of legal aid in many rural areas of America.

Civil legal aid organizations may also receive assistance from [Interest on Lawyers Trust Account](#) (IOLTA) funds, state legislative appropriations, attorney licensing fees and bar dues, foundation grants, donations, class action settlements, and court filing—fee revenue.

### Indigent Defense

In the landmark case *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335 (1963), the Supreme Court held that state or local governments must provide an attorney to any defendant facing prison time who could not afford legal representation.

Currently, about 80% of criminal defendants in the United States qualify for a government-appointed lawyer. Despite this constitutional guarantee, most states annually spend [barely 1%](#) of their criminal justice budgets on indigent defense.

A few public interest lawyers practicing indigent defense have come up with creative solutions to address this gaping need for quality legal services. Jonathan Rapping used foundation grants to start [Gideon’s Promise](#), a nonprofit that used a “Teach for America” model to send recent law graduates to

public defense offices throughout the South. Three St. Louis University School of Law grads started [ArchCity Defenders](#), a nonprofit that provides holistic criminal and civil legal services to their community's homeless and working poor.

## The Support Network: Public Interest Law Career Advocates

### Law Schools

Many law schools support public interest law through courses, clinics, and law student pro bono opportunities. The American Bar Association (ABA) has a [Directory of Law School Public Interest and Pro Bono Programs](#) on their site – see if you can find your school!

Law students also play a major role in supporting public interest law. Get involved in your law school's public interest law leadership if you haven't already. If you can't find an organization on your campus dedicated to public interest law, start one! [Email us and we'll help you out.](#)

### Equal Justice Works

[Equal Justice Works](#) aims to create a just society by mobilizing the next generation of lawyers committed to equal justice.

We provide leadership to ensure a sustainable pipeline of talented and trained lawyers are involved in public service. Equal Justice Works provides a continuum of programs that begin with incoming law school students and extend into later careers in the profession. We provide the nation's leading public interest law fellowship program and offer more postgraduate, full-time legal positions in public service than any other organization.

### Access to Justice Commissions

Access to Justice Commissions bring together state supreme court justices, local judges, public interest lawyers, bar associations, community leaders, and other stakeholders to help improve access to civil justice. The first access to justice commission gathered in Washington State in 1994, and they have now spread to many other states all across the country.

Access to Justice Commissions play a critical role in removing barriers to legal aid and pro bono services. Some states offer opportunities for law students, such as the [Texas Access to Justice Commission](#) rural internship program and Law Student Pro Bono Challenge.

### National Legal Aid & Defender Association

The [National Legal Aid & Defender Association](#) (NLADA) leads a network of legal aid and indigent defense advocates on the frontlines to advance justice.

The NLADA is the oldest nonprofit association devoted to promoting excellence in the delivery of both civil and criminal services for those who can't afford counsel. They provide networking and training opportunities, and present annual awards to public interest law leaders.

### Public Service Jobs Database

The [Public Service Jobs Database](#) (PSJD), formerly PSLawNet, was founded in 1989 by students at New York University School of Law.

Today, PSJD is housed within the National Association for Law Placement (NALP), and connects law students with over 15,000 public service employers looking for interns and new hires. The site also contains a Resource Center with summer funding guides, a career fair calendar, career tips, and more.

### Legal Services Corporation

The [Legal Services Corporation](#) (LSC) was created by Congress in 1974 to promote equal access to justice and to provide high-quality civil legal assistance to low-income Americans.

LSC provides funding to 134 legal aid programs in the country and hosts annual events and summits to promote equal access to justice.

### Bar Associations

Many bar associations have public interest sections devoted to providing pro bono assistance to low-income clients. These pro bono programs often include law students in their advocacy efforts.

Some bar associations also host networking receptions with public interest attorneys, present awards to state and local pro bono leaders, and provide fellowships and summer funding for law students and recent law graduates.

### Corporate Pro Bono

Corporate pro bono work is performed by attorneys of in-house counsel legal departments at major law firms, businesses, and corporations. These pro bono attorneys help fill in the gaps that legal service providers struggle to fix.

Many corporations have long-standing pro bono programs that offer free legal services to low-income community members. Many major law firms even hire full-time Pro Bono Coordinators to help lead the corporation's pro bono efforts.

## Get Involved

Law students can get started in the field of public interest law through on-campus programs, clinics, pro bono projects, courses, student organizations, and internships.

If your school has an office dedicated to helping students pursue public interest law, talk with a career counselor about opportunities at your law school.

If your school doesn't have a public interest law office or designated counselor, contact the Law School Engagement & Advocacy Unit at [lsea@equaljusticeworks.org](mailto:lsea@equaljusticeworks.org). Our staff is on-hand and ready to talk you through ways to get involved and stay committed!