



GOVERNMENT & PUBLIC INTEREST CAREERS HANDBOOK

An Introduction to Public Service Careers

The University of Oklahoma

College of Law

I. Introduction

A career in public service can mean many things – but at its core it means the practice of law to further interests shared by the entire public. Government and public interest work is based on concepts of justice, fairness, and the advancement of the public good. This is a broad definition and one that encompasses working in government, non-profit organizations, and public interest law firms.

II. Who are government and public interest employers?

There are many different kinds of jobs which fall under the “government” and “public interest” umbrella. The following are examples of government and public interest employers but this list is not exhaustive. When considering a job in public service it is important to consider what kind of work you want to do – transactional, litigation, public policy, etc.

- **Legal Services Organizations:** Legal service organizations provide direct legal services to indigent individuals and families in civil matters, including transactional work and litigation. Examples of legal service organizations in the Norman, Oklahoma, area include organizations such as Legal Aid, Trinity Legal Clinic, and Catholic Charities – all of which hire OU Law students as interns.
- **Policy Advocacy Organizations:** Policy advocacy organizations work for change in legislation, regulations, and other types of policy. Attorneys in policy advocacy organizations work for systemic change through lobbying, legal writing, raising public awareness, and working with community groups and local governments. Examples of policy advocacy organizations in the Norman, Oklahoma, area include the American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma (ACLU) and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) – both of which hire OU Law students as interns.
- **Public Defender’s Offices:** Funded by the government, these offices provide defense attorneys for indigent defendants in criminal cases. Public defenders represent clients in all phases of the legal process, from bond and probation hearings to complete jury trials. Attorneys spend a good deal of time outside of the office, meeting with incarcerated clients, doing investigative work, and representing clients in the courtroom. There are public defender’s offices throughout Oklahoma. Several OU Law students intern with the Oklahoma County Public Defender’s Office and other public defender’s offices throughout Oklahoma and Texas.
- **Prosecuting Offices: District Attorneys and U.S. Attorneys:** District attorneys prosecute state cases. Local district attorney’s offices are organized by county. Larger offices, such as those in Oklahoma County, may have specialized units focusing on particular issues. Several OU Law students intern with district attorney’s offices throughout Oklahoma and Texas. The Office of the U.S. Attorney prosecutes federal cases. Offices are located throughout the country and are a branch of the U.S. Department of Justice. In Oklahoma,

there is the Eastern District, Western District, and Northern District of the U.S. Attorney's Office. OU Law students intern with each district each year.

- **Government Entities/Organizations:** Government entities at the federal, state, and local level often have in-house legal counsel that enforce laws and regulations. For example, at the federal level, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), just to name two, hire attorneys. At the state level, organizations that specialize in particular areas of state government, such as the Oklahoma Department of Human Services – Child Support Services, hire OU Law interns each year. Moreover, the Oklahoma Attorney General Office, which is the attorney for the state and serves as the chief legal and law enforcement officer for the state, also hires OU Law students as interns. At the local level, city attorney's offices, such as the City of Norman, often hire OU Law interns as well.
- **Public Interest Law Firms:** These law firms, which are often small, specialize in one or more public interest law areas (employment discrimination, labor law, family law, immigration, civil rights, etc.) or work with an underrepresented group.

III. What should I consider when contemplating a career in public service?

What kind of law do you want to practice? It is important to understand what kind of law you want to practice. Think about whether you are interested in transactional work or litigation. Do you want to work with clients every day or are you more interested in research, writing, and public policy? It is completely acceptable if you are not sure – law school is great time to experience many different areas. It is just as important to learn about what you do not like as much as what you enjoy. Therefore, it is essential that you gain real-world experience during law school – whatever that may be. You can gain experience through pro bono work, internships, externships, and clinics, just to name a few of the opportunities available through OU Law (see Section IV below).

Where do you want to be geographically? Think about where you want to live after you graduate. If you want to go home, it is important to keep in touch with contacts there. When you are home over break, make it a priority to ask people to coffee and let them know your career goals. If you want to be in a new part of the country, make it a priority to find an internship in that area while you are still in law school. This way, you will have some connections in that area prior to graduation. Think strategically about the best and most economical way to find an internship. For example, if you want to be in Washington, D.C., consider attending the Equal Justice Works Career Fair, which is held annually in late October. This is a great “bang for your buck” in regard to meeting several potential employers in a short time period.

IV. What “outside of the classroom” public service learning opportunities are available to me at OU Law?

Regardless of what kind of law you may want to practice post-graduation, it is essential to gain as much legal experience as possible – *any* kind of legal experience – while in law school. There is ample opportunity to gain a wide breadth of experience in “outside of the classroom” learning opportunities which are offered right here at OU Law.

- Pro Bono and Public Service Opportunities: Every OU Law student is encouraged to sign a Pro Bono and Public Service Pledge in which the student commits to completing a set amount (either 50 hours or 100 hours) of pro bono and public service during their law school career. There are numerous pro bono and public service opportunities offered through OU Law, including but not limited to Cleveland County Court Appointed Special Advocates, known as CASA (in which students are assigned a particular case, meet with families at least monthly, and provide recommendations to the court), Legal Aid Live Help (which is a real-time, online chat service that helps site visitors find legal information and free legal services), the Victim Advocacy Program, formerly known as VPO (in which students work with the Women’s Resource Center to assist victims in completing protective orders, with an opportunity to even become court advocates for the victims), and the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program, known as VITA (in which students help low-income and elderly taxpayers in the preparation and filing of their federal and state income tax returns). Each of these programs provide training at the law school. For more information on these opportunities, and the pro bono program generally, visit the Career Development Office.
- Internships: Legal internships are available to students during the summer and/or during the academic year. Symplicity, the job database available to all OU Law students and alumni, has new positions posted nearly every day. Students find internships through Symplicity, OU Law’s OCI (on-campus interviewing) program, the Government & Public Interest Career Fair, the Equal Justice Works Career Fair, networking, etc. Most internships in the public interest sector are unpaid but there are ways to receive outside funding for the work. See Section V below for more information on how to find internships, and Section VI for more information regarding outside funding sources.
- Externships: Professor Connie Smothermon leads OU Law’s externship program. An externship, in reality, is nearly identical to an internship in regard to the work – the only difference is that a student will receive (and must pay for) academic credit for the work. The work must be unpaid. (For example, if a student receives an unpaid internship at Legal Aid, the student can contact Professor Smothermon about obtaining academic credit for the work, thereby, from a technical standpoint, turning the unpaid internship into an externship.) Students can work in an externship during the summer and/or during the academic year at a variety of placements. Students must complete 130 hours per semester at their placement to receive academic credit. Students must also enroll in an “Issues in Professionalism” class in their first semester as an extern. For more information, contact Professor Smothermon at csmothermon@ou.edu.
- OU Legal Clinic: The OU Legal Clinic is split into two separate clinics – the Civil Clinic and the Criminal Defense Clinic. In both clinics, students work under the supervision of a licensed faculty attorney and receive academic credit for their work. Students must enroll in a “Litigation Skills” class in their first semester in the clinic. In the Civil Clinic, students handle all aspects of civil caseloads, including family law, small claims, and drafting wills. In the Criminal Defense Clinic, students handle all aspects of misdemeanor cases. Contact Lori Ketner (lketner@ou.edu) in the Legal Clinic for more information.

- International Indigenous Human Rights Clinic: This clinic is run by Professor Alvaro Baca. Students prepare reports to the United Nations Human Rights Council for the periodic review of human rights conditions in various countries. These reports assess the positive development and challenges faced by these countries in regard to the human rights of indigenous people. For more information, contact Professor Baca at abaca@ou.edu.

NOTE: For some internships, externships, and clinical opportunities, it is beneficial for the student to become a Legal Licensed Intern (LLI). All forms and applications to become an LLI can be found by clicking the link “The Rules of the Supreme Court of the State of Oklahoma on Legal Internships” at <http://www.law.ou.edu/content/licensed-legal-internship>. More information can also be obtained in the OU Legal Clinic or by contacting Lori Ketner in the Legal Clinic at lketnar@ou.edu.

V. How can I find a government or public interest internship or post-graduate position?

The list below provides resources for finding public interest internships and jobs locally and nationally. It is important to keep in mind that many public interest employers do not have the resources to hire an employee solely dedicated to recruiting or hiring. Therefore, as the job-seeker, it is important to be proactive. For example, if you are particularly interested in an organization, research whether there may be any OU Law alumni working there, send an introductory email, and follow up with a phone call. You do not want to be an annoyance, but it is important to be proactive in your career search. Always contact the Career Development Office for guidance and support – we are here to assist you!

- OU Law Government & Public Interest Career Fair: Every year (in the beginning of the spring semester), OU Law hosts a Government & Public Interest Career Fair where local government and public interest employers come to the law school to meet students. Some even conduct interviews the day of the fair or will schedule interviews with the students they meet at the fair. In years past, over 30 employers have attended the fair. The fair is an opportunity for students to meet these employers, provide a copy of their resume to the employers, and learn more about each organization’s mission. Each of the employers have internship opportunities for OU Law students.
- Equal Justice Works Career Fair: Each fall, OU Law sponsors a group of students (covering their airline tickets, hotel costs, and registration fees) to attend the annual Equal Justice Works Career Fair which is held in late October every year in Washington, D.C. Any student can attend the fair at their own cost, but to apply for OU Law sponsorship, students must complete and submit an application in late August. Recipients are chosen by a representative from the Career Development Office and the Public Interest Law Student Association officers.
- Symplicity: While Symplicity, OU Law’s online job database, includes job postings from employers of all types, including private practice employers, government and public interest employers will post job and internship opportunities as well. It is important to check Symplicity regularly to see what opportunities are available.

- On-Campus Interviewing: Many local government agencies (including but not limited to the U.S. Attorney's Offices, District Attorney's offices, and Attorney's General offices) will conduct on-campus interviews in the spring and/or fall semesters. Several public interest employers and other government agencies (such as Public Defender's offices) will collect resumes through Symplicity and conduct interviews at their offices. Some employers who attend the Government & Public Interest Career Fair will collect resumes ahead of the fair via Symplicity and may schedule interviews on-campus the day of the fair.
- Direct Sends: Every spring and fall semester, the Career Development Office culls hundreds of national legal internship job postings and adds them to the current OCI session in Symplicity. Essentially, the Career Development Office is doing the students' due diligence for them, as it is always a priority of the office to post government and public interest internship positions in Washington, D.C. and Texas, specifically. These employers do not come to OU Law to conduct interviews, but they are seeking legal interns from across the country and they always welcome students to apply on their websites directly.
- Public Interest Job Databases: There are several nation-wide public interest job databases which are fantastic resources for public interest internship and job seekers:
 - PSJD: This is a database of law-related public services opportunities, which is available by subscription only. OU Law students have access privileges and can register themselves at www.psjd.org.
 - Government and Honors Internship Handbook: This handbook, published by the University of Arizona, covers federal employment and summer programs, and it also available by subscription only. OU Law students have access privileges at: <http://arizonahandbooks.com/u/soonerlaw>. Please contact the Career Development Office for the password.
 - USAJobs.gov: This is the official job site of the U.S. federal government. Postings can be accessed at: www.usajobs.gov.
 - The Idealist: This database includes public interest jobs (both legal and non-legal), and it is open to the public at www.idealists.org.
- Network: We cannot stress enough how important it is to network. Do not be shy about asking people to coffee – even if you do not know them well. Generally speaking, people love to help law students and new lawyers develop their careers. Start the conversation by asking people about their careers and any advice they would have for you as a law student and young lawyer. Visit the Career Development Office often if you need any assistance in drafting a networking email, advice on how best to reach out to someone, and any other questions or concerns you may have.

VI. What sources of funding exist for public interest internships and jobs?

During Law School

- OU Law Summer Public Interest Fellowships: Sponsored by OU Law, students who work in unpaid government and public interest internships during the summer are eligible to apply for summer fellowship funding. The application is available every spring semester (usually in late February) in the Career Development Office and applications are due in late March/early April. (The exact deadline will be listed in the application.) To apply, students must have an offer of summer employment to work at least 200 hours during the summer. Eligible host employers can be located anywhere in the world. In the past, host employers have included federal, state, and local prosecutor's and public defender's offices, federal and state agencies, legal services non-profit organizations, and human rights organizations doing law-related work.
- Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps JD Program: Sponsored by Equal Justice Works, this nation-wide funding is open to students who have received an offer for summer employment at a non-profit organization or government agency doing particular legal work (as determined each year and as more specifically set forth on the website) to work at least 300 hours during the summer. Students must submit an application at <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/law-school/amicorpsjd>. Recipients receive a \$1,222.00 education award that can be applied to tuition or student loans. The deadline for submitting the application is in mid-April.
- PSJD: PSJD is a great resource for finding nation-wide summer funding opportunities. Some of the opportunities have very specific requirements but it is important to search nonetheless, as you never know what might apply to you. You will need to create a PSJD account to log in. The summer funding resources can be found at: [http://www.psjd.org/Summer Funding Resources](http://www.psjd.org/Summer_Funding_Resources).
- Ms. JD: Each year, Ms. JD, a non-profit organization dedicated to the success of women lawyers, awards summer stipends to female 2L law students who will be working in public interest internships during the summer. The deadline to apply is in mid-May. More information can be found at <http://ms-jd.org/programs/>.

Post-Graduate

- Gallogly Family Foundation Public Interest Fellowship: This is a post-graduate fellowship for two OU Law graduates working in the public interest for a domestic 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The fellowships begin in the fall after the students' graduation. Students must apply for the fellowship in the fall of their 3L year. The application deadline is in mid-October. To apply, the students must have a host organization committed to their employment. The fellowship includes a one-year salary of \$45,000.00 and up to \$5,000.00 to help cover the cost of health care benefits. Fellowships last one year, with the option to renew at the discretion of the Foundation and upon the request of the fellow and the host organization. For more information, contact the Career Development Office.
- Skadden Fellowship Program: This is very prestigious and competitive nation-wide fellowship program, and there are hundreds of applicants every year from law schools across the country. The Skadden Fellowship Program awards a two-year fellowship to law

school graduates working in the public interest. Applicants must apply in the fall of their 3L year and have a host organization committed to their employment. For more information, go to <http://www.skaddenfellowships.org/about-foundation>.

- Equal Justice Works: This is also a very prestigious and competitive nation-wide fellowship program. The Equal Justice Works Fellowship Program awards a two-year fellowship to law school graduates working in the public interest. Applicants must apply in September of their 3L year and have a host organization committed to their employment. For more information, go to <http://www.equaljusticeworks.org/post-grad/equal-justice-works-fellowships>.