Public Interest and Public Service Opportunities
A Culture of Community Service and Involvement

All lawyers, and therefore law students, have a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. Dickinson Law students are encouraged to explore that responsibility by getting involved in public interest and volunteer opportunities both on and off-campus. By providing a map of the opportunities provided at Dickinson Law, we hope to help students turn their interest in serving their community into a significant part of their legal career.

Use this resource as a guide to understanding public interest opportunities at Dickinson Law, but consult with the Career Services Office for further resources and to develop your own independent public interest career strategy.

dickinsonlaw.psu.edu/career-planning

Dickinson Law aims to cultivate a culture of service and community involvement whereby law students are trained on the importance of service within the legal profession. Students graduate as profession-ready lawyers who are eager to serve and lead in their community.
What is Public Interest Law?

There is no single definition of “public interest law.” Some construe public interest law narrowly to embrace only provision of legal services to the under-represented. Public service is a broader term which extends to work for the interests of people not traditionally served by the for-profit legal sector, including representation of government entities and officials. Community Service is volunteer work in the community that may or may not be law-related.

THE LAWYER AS…PUBLIC INTEREST ADVOCATE

As a public interest lawyer, you’ll spend your career serving the public and advocating for the underrepresented through transactional work, policymaking and adversarial proceedings. You’ll work for international, national or regional nonprofit organizations or for government entities at the federal state or local level.

Public Interest Settings

PUBLIC INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS

Direct Service Organizations provide legal assistance to people who could otherwise not afford representation. Legal assistance providers usually handle matters involving government benefits, housing, family law, consumer law, and employment issues. Some organizations specialize in particular matters such as housing for the elderly. Lawyers in legal assistance programs have significant client contact through interviewing and counseling, negotiations, assistance with legal documents, research, and representation.

Policy Oriented Organizations specialize in larger scale strategies to protect legal rights or bring about social change in a particular area. These organizations rely on impact and class action litigation, lobby for legislation, and provide information on current developments in their specialty area. Examples of such organizations are the American Civil Liberties Union and the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

PUBLIC SERVICE

Public Defenders are responsible for providing legal services in criminal matters to people who could not otherwise afford representation by a lawyer. While the structure of public defenders’ offices depends on location, lawyers typically engage in pretrial, trial, and post-trial proceedings.

Prosecuting Attorneys represent a particular level of government in criminal proceedings. Office structure and caseload differ depending on the level of government and location. Prosecutors will also engage in significant pretrial, trial, and post-trial activities. Prosecuting attorneys include county District Attorneys, State Attorneys General, and United States Department of Justice and United States Attorneys Offices.
Executive Agencies employ lawyers as in-house counsel to develop regulations, monitor compliance, draft and research legislation, and participate in administrative hearings. Opportunities for lawyers interested in this type of employment are available in both the state and federal arenas. The Federal Trade Commission and Pennsylvania Department of Education are examples of executive agencies.

Elected Offices provide another outlet for people with legal backgrounds. Lawyers elected to office are in an excellent position to pursue public interest initiatives through introducing legislation and community advocacy.

Legislatures, both state and federal, hire lawyers as staff for legislative committees. Individual legislators also employ lawyers as staff members and legislative counsel. Lawyers working for committees and representatives may draft and research legislation and offer legal advice. For most committee positions, previous relevant employment is required. Many legislative committees and offices hire summer interns and externs.

Courts offer judicial clerkships and staff attorney positions at the state and federal levels. Judicial clerks work as close legal assistants to judges. Clerks analyze briefs, perform additional legal research, write memoranda, draft opinions, and consult with the judges on various issues.

**Law Firms**

Public Interest Firms offer legal services on public interest issues in a traditional setting. Public interest firms may represent individual clients as well as organizations or labor unions.

Private Law Firms might encourage lawyers to participate in pro bono activities similar to those associated with public interest firms. These firms permit lawyers to apply a portion of their billable hours to public interest work. Some large firms also offer pro bono experiences for summer associates. Information about a firm’s pro bono commitment can be determined through interviews and reviewing the firm’s materials regarding their pro bono policy and commitment to public service. Depending on the firm’s goals, many law firms are actively engaged in representing lower income clients. In fact, according to NALP, 75 percent of low and moderate-income citizens have their legal needs met through small and medium-sized law firms.

**Other**

Labor Unions representing both public and private sector employees offer a significant number of opportunities. Almost all national and international unions have a central legal department that provides overall legal direction and advice for both the leadership and local constituents.

International Public Interest opportunities vary widely as do the settings in which you can practice. The United States government, non-profit organizations including human rights organizations, and international fellowships all offer opportunities in this field.
Public Interest and Public Service Opportunities at Dickinson Law

CLINICS

You may choose to participate in a variety of legal clinics during your second and third years. As a clinic intern, you’ll provide a much-needed public service while you sharpen your legal skills and broaden your practice experience in a real-life legal setting. Under the guidance of clinical faculty, you’ll offer helpful legal services to area residents and public interest organizations that can’t afford private legal representation. You may also participate in systemic policy and legislative work. The Dickinson Law clinical program provides desperately needed services to the community and uniquely valuable educational experiences for students.

Dickinson Law currently offers three distinct types of clinics:

1. **Community Law Clinic**: Provides direct individual client representation to clients living near or below the poverty line primarily in matters of disability law, family law or housing.

2. **Children's Advocacy Clinic**: Provides a mixture of direct client representation and policy advocacy through an innovative interdisciplinary clinical program where law students and graduate social work students represent children in the legal system and work to address problems in the child welfare system.

3. **Medical-Legal Partnership Clinic**: Provides direct client representation and interdisciplinary collaboration with health care providers to address the health-harming legal needs of the community including public benefits, immigration, housing, education, and other matters.

Clinic offices are located just a few short blocks from the Law School, and conveniently close to the courthouse at:

45 North Pitt Street  
Carlisle, PA 17013  
Phone: 717-243-2968
Internships
Dickinson Law’s experiential learning curriculum allows students to add an additional summer to their resume by participating in a semester internship placement in courts, public service law offices and governmental agencies. Internships allow second and third-year students to work in a legal setting while obtaining academic credit. You’ll gain valuable experience working for a state judge, prosecutor, public defender, government agency or nonprofit organization. Dickinson Law internship placements have previously included work with the following types of organizations:

- Office of the United States Attorney
- Office of the County District Attorney
- Office of the Federal Public Defender
- Office of the County Public Defender
- Pennsylvania Governor’s Office of General Counsel
- Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General
- Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas
- Ben Franklin TechCelerator Program
- U.S. Army War College
- MidPenn Legal Services

FEDERAL JUDICIAL INTERNSHIP PROGRAM
Internship opportunities exist for students interested in working for a federal judge for two semesters. Students have previously worked in federal judges’ and magistrate judges’ chambers in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania.

SEMESTER-IN-PRACTICE PROGRAMS
Continue your transition from promising student to practicing attorney with a Semester-in-Practice. These immersive programs allow you to work full-time in Harrisburg, Washington, DC, or at an international tribunal.

1. Semester-in-Harrisburg: Students spend a semester during their third year of law school in the Pennsylvania state capital working for academic credit at an approved state government agency, the state legislature, or a nonprofit group that focuses on state government affairs.

2. Semester-in-Washington: Students spend the semester interning at a federal government agency, nonprofit organization or a public interest group in Washington, D.C. Students attend a weekly seminar on federal regulatory and legislative practice.


THE MILLER CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEREST LAW AND ADVOCACY
The Center for Public Interest Law and Advocacy is the hub of public interest law at Penn State’s Dickinson Law. The Center creates practice experiences for students through pro bono service, and provides ongoing support for public interest practitioners through training and resources. After completing sixty hours of qualified service, students are formally recognized as Miller Center Public Interest Advocates.
THE PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FUND (PILF)
PILF is a student organization dedicated to promoting the practice of public interest law. Its annual auction and fundraising efforts raise funds each year to underwrite the Cherie M. Millage Summer Fellowship Program. The fellowships permit students to pursue summer employment in public service organizations that otherwise are unable to offer compensation for their work as advocates. Fellowships have funded students at organizations throughout the country and internationally, including The David Berg Center for Law and Aging (Bronx, New York), Vital Immigrant Defense Advocacy and Services, (Santa Rosa California), the Luzerne County Public Defender’s Office (Wilkes Barres, PA) and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (Toronto, Canada).

INTEREST ON LAWYER’S TRUST ACCOUNTS (IOLTA) FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM
Using IOLTA funds, the Law School annually sponsors fellowships for law students’ working full time in Pennsylvania legal services offices or other IOLTA-funded organizations in Pennsylvania during the summer. Those placed in Legal Services programs will assist staff attorneys in representing eligible clients in a variety of case types, most commonly, protection from abuse, custody, landlord tenant, public benefits, and consumer law matters. Students in these positions have extensive contact with clients, and may carry a caseload of their own. Some students will have the opportunity to represent clients in administrative hearings such as unemployment compensation hearings. Students placed in statewide advocacy or pro bono organizations will work on policy or broad-scope matters affecting access to justice and other substantive areas of law. Past placements have included:

- Community Justice Project
- MidPenn Legal Services
- Legal Aid of Southeastern PA
- YWCA Domestic Violence Legal Center
- Pennsylvania Bar Association, Pro Bono Referral
- AIDS Law Project
- Neighborhood Legal Services Association

“The IOLTA Summer Fellowship allowed me to spend my second and most pivotal law school summer assisting staff attorneys in Philadelphia with the AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania. Through this experience, I was able to establish myself in the legal market I hope to work in, and gain first-hand experience working with a specialized population to address their legal needs. I was exposed to areas including Federal Employment Discrimination, Public Benefits, and Immigration. Having a presence in the community is vital to my success, and it’s even more important in public interest law where jobs are competitive.”

Kadeem Morris ’17
Aids Law Project of Pennsylvania
Leading Law Students Program

Leading Law Students is a program developed to provide law students with the opportunity to serve their local community by participating on the Board of a nonprofit organization during their second year of law school. A nonprofit board provides an excellent environment that promotes individual growth in leadership. Law students can embrace this learning environment and help benefit and develop an active and healthy local community, while also preparing to be future leaders. Leading Law Students aims to facilitate an inclusive community partnership between the law school, law students, alumni and nonprofit community partners in the Greater Harrisburg area. Organizations that have participated in Dickinson Law’s Leading Law Students Program include:

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS
- Carlisle Chamber of Commerce (Carlisle, PA)
- Cumberland Area Economic Development Corporation (Carlisle, PA)
- The Harrisburg Regional Chamber & Capital Region Economic Development Corporation (Harrisburg, PA)

EMPLOYMENT AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
- Employment Skills Center (Carlisle, PA)

ENVIRONMENT, SUSTAINABILITY AND CONSERVATION
- L.E.A.F. Project (Leadership Education & Farming) (Carlisle, PA)
- South Mountain Partnership (Boiling Springs, PA)

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
- Project SHARE (Carlisle, PA)
- Central PA Food Bank (Harrisburg, PA)
- Hope Station (Carlisle, PA)
- Catholic Charities (Harrisburg, PA)
- Vision Resources of Central PA (Harrisburg, PA)

HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS
- Carlisle CARES (Carlisle, PA)

LGBT
- Equality Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, PA)
- LGBT Center of Central PA (Harrisburg, PA)

HISTORIC PRESERVATION
- Cumberland County Historical Society (Carlisle, PA)

WOMEN’S RIGHTS
- YWCA (Carlisle, PA)

ARTS & CULTURE
- Jump Street (Harrisburg, PA)

IMMIGRATION/REFUGEE
- PA Immigration & Refugee Women’s Network (Enola, PA)
Volunteer Service Projects

Students are encouraged to participate in volunteer service projects outside the walls of the law school. Law students attend homeless shelters to staff legal information tables and provide intake screenings. They participate in pro bono programs coordinated through county bar associations and legal services offices. Students counsel area residents in preparing their federal, state, and local income tax returns. These service projects provide students with the opportunity to team up with local attorneys who are interested in combating issues of poverty, homelessness and abuse. Opportunities to get involved in the community have included:

- Bethesda Mission Legal Intake Clinic
- Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA)
- Project SHARE
- Expungement Clinics
- Pennsylvania Innocence Project
- Wills for Heroes

“It was interesting to see how a nonprofit board makes decisions. Some proposals seemed like no-brainers to me when they were first proposed, but then, through discussion, they looked to be not quite in line with the society’s mission. The board was conservative and cautious, but also interested in developing new programs to reach new members of the community. Everyone on the board was deeply knowledgeable about Cumberland County and all seemed to be amateur historians in their own right.”

Jonathan Vaitl ’17
Cumberland County Historical Society
Important Resources to Get You Started

In conducting your public interest job search, there are a number of avenues that you should pursue. The Career Portal is one resource you can utilize and you should login regularly or create a job alert to be emailed directly to you. In addition, the following resources are a good place to start your search. Schedule an appointment with the Career Services Office to discuss individual job search goals and further develop your job search strategy.

PUBLIC INTEREST

PSJD is a unique online clearinghouse for law students and lawyers to connect with public interest job listings and career-building resources. As a subscriber school, PSJD is a free resource to Dickinson Law students and alumni. This is a collaborative project among over 200 American and Canadian law schools that allows students and graduates to search among thousands of public interest job opportunities and employer profiles across the country. In addition to its database, PSJD offers an online library of educational and career-building resources for those interested in pursuing a career in public service.

GOVERNMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Government Honors & Internship/Public Policy Handbooks These Handbooks are updated annually by the University of Arizona and contain deadlines and listings for both state and federal government internship and honors program opportunities. The password can be obtained on the Career Portal or by asking the Career Services Office.

CONFERENCES AND CAREER FAIRS

Dickinson Law students are encouraged to attend network-building conferences and public interest career fairs and events. Below is a sampling of career fairs and conferences focused on public interest advocacy. For a complete list of career fairs and opportunities, please consult the Career Services Office.

Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair
The Equal Justice Works Conference and Career Fair is the largest national public interest legal career fair in the country which takes place annually in Washington, D.C. in October. More than 160 public interest employers conduct interviews for internships and full-time jobs and meet with students in informal “table talk” discussions of public interest legal opportunities. Over 1,200 students from nearly 200 law schools attend for interviews, workshops on public interest careers, job search advice, networking, resume and cover letter review, mock interviews, and more.

Peggy Browning Fund National Law Students Workers’ Rights Conference
With multiple interactive workshops, panel discussions and keynote address, the conference will give each participant additional insight into becoming an advocate for workers and their families. This conference is held annually in October in Linthicum Heights, Maryland about a two hour drive from Carlisle.
POST-GRADUATE PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIPS

State public defenders’ offices, district attorney’s offices, state, local and federal government as well as most legal services offices hire law students directly out of law school. Many entry-level attorney positions with nonprofit organizations are obtained through public interest fellowships which can be funded in various ways. These fellowships can be organization-based or project-based. For project-based fellowships students work with a sponsoring nonprofit organization to develop a project which serves the legal needs of the community. Deadlines for post-graduate public interest fellowships occur between your second and third year of law school, so it is best to consult with Career Services early if you are interested in pursuing a fellowship.