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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lawcommons.luc.edu/pilr/vol10/iss2/13

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Equal Justice Works Fellowships Help Launch Public Interest Careers

By Equal Justice Works Staff

Many law students and young lawyers begin their careers with a strong desire to put their expertise to work seeing that justice is available to all who need it, not just those who can afford it, and to apply the law on behalf of individuals, organizations, or movements that are underserved by the legal community. But there are many obstacles preventing attorneys from practicing public interest law: a shortage of entry-level jobs, daunting educational debts, and the low salaries associated with social justice work. There is a way to overcome those barriers, however.

More than 550 new lawyers have launched public interest careers through Equal Justice Works Fellowships, the largest post-graduate legal fellowship program in the country. Equal Justice Works coordinates with sponsors (law firms, corporations, bar associations, individuals and foundations) to help fund attorneys interested in causes that desperately need lawyers, such as homelessness, environmental justice, and immigration. Each year, hundreds of passionate law students and new lawyers pair up with nonprofit organizations to submit an application for a two-year Equal Justice Works Fellowship.

There are three main components to the application: The project, the candidate, and the host organization.

The project is an initiative designed to bring legal advocacy to individuals, groups, or issues that are not adequately represented in the legal system. Because the goal is to create new public interest positions, Equal Justice Works Fellowships are not used to fund existing jobs. Instead, they provide Fellows the opportunity to design a new position within a host organization.

The candidate must be a third-year law student, recent law graduate, or an attorney from an Equal Justice Works member school. He or she must show a demonstrated commitment to public interest law and possess both the relevant skills and the initiative to carry out the goals of the project.

The host organization must be a nonprofit organization that has been granted 501(c)3 status by the Internal Revenue Service. As the Fellow’s employer, the host organization provides training, supervision, benefits, and the support necessary to help the Fellow successfully accomplish the goals of the project.

All applications are judged by professionals in the field, who evaluate the quality of the proposed project, the host organization, and the candidate. They also consider such factors as issue area, geographic diversity, and any preferences of the sponsor. Traditional measures of academic achievement, such as grades and law review, are not relevant to this selection process.

A pool of high-scoring applicants is selected in October and these semi-finalists are interviewed in November and December. The Equal Justice Works sponsors participate in the interview and selection process; they are also encouraged to maintain an active role after Fellowship selection by participating in the project in various ways.

Once the candidates are chosen, offers are extended on a rolling basis between November and January, and Fellows start their projects the following September. Equal Justice Works does not require a candidate to...
have taken or passed a bar exam, but the prospective host organization may require bar passage or a license to practice in their state. Candidates are encouraged to discuss the matter with their prospective host organization before applying.

The two-year Fellowships offer a standard salary level and eligibility to apply for a generous loan repayment assistance program. Equal Justice Works Fellows may also attend annual trainings, participate in a leadership development program, and link with a national network of Fellows and alumni.


In addition to the Fellowship Program, Equal Justice Works also provides public interest opportunities with an AmeriCorps-funded program called Pro Bono Legal Corps. The postgraduate program places attorneys at pro bono and legal aid organizations around the country to promote public service ideals among law students and at law schools.

The primary responsibility of the Equal Justice Works/AmeriCorps attorneys is to develop quality pro bono opportunities that expand legal resources in low-income and underserved communities. To gain hands-on, law-related expertise and experience, the Equal Justice Works/AmeriCorps attorneys also have opportunities to provide direct legal assistance to clients and to develop substantive legal resources. These one-year positions begin in the fall at 10 legal aid and pro bono organizations located across the nation. Equal Justice Works Fellowships was launched in 1992 and has provided opportunities for lawyers working on social justice legal projects with the help of a matching grant from the Open Society Institute since 1998. Lawyers and students interested in any Equal Justice Works program can learn more about them at www.equaljusticeworks.org.
PILR
Public Interest Law Reporter

Subscription Information

Subscription rates
$15 per year
$9 per year, students
$6 per single issue/back issue
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Publication Schedule
PILR publishes three issues annually
March
June
December

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