

WHAT IS PUBLIC SERVICE LAW?

Public service law, often called public interest law, is defined as providing legal representation to individuals, groups, or interests that historically have been underrepresented in our legal system. This definition also includes attorneys who serve the public through work for the government and judiciary.

Public service law is often confused with *pro bono* work. Public service law is an entire field of representation by attorneys who are full-time paid employees of an organization. *Pro bono* work is *volunteer* legal work performed by attorneys in any field to serve the public interest. All *pro bono* work is done in the public interest, however not all public service work is done on a *pro bono* basis.

Those attorneys practicing public service law employ a wide range of strategies and activities to reach their goals, including litigation, counseling, lobbying, research and investigation, the use of the press, mobilizing community demonstrations, and organizing and educating grass roots groups.

In addition, public service lawyers sometimes select clients and cases based on whether the representation would advance the ends of social justice. This differs dramatically from traditional legal practices where the market is generally the principal determinant of case selection.

Public Service Jobs and Positions: An Overview

1. The Private Sector Public Service Lawyer
2. Non-Profit Organizations

There is an endless list of non-profit organizations that specialize in public service law. The most commonly recognized organizations are Legal Aid and Legal Services, which are partially federally-funded entities that provide civil legal representation to low-income individuals. Other organizations include those advocating in a single area of the law, such as the Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities or the Children First Project. For more extensive information on the types of organizations available, the PSLawNet database in the Public Interest Law Center is an excellent resource.

3. Public Service within Law Firms

There are many private firms who specialize in, but are not limited to, public service cases, and many private firms who accept all types of cases, but dedicate a substantial portion of their time, on a *pro bono* basis, to public service causes. In addition, there are also private law firms who handle solely public interest cases – private public interest law firms.

1. The Government Lawyer

Most public service lawyers who do not represent private clients work for the government – federal, state, or local. The government is, after all, the ultimate embodiment of public service. A government lawyer works on behalf of the public, as an elected or appointed official to serve that office's functions. Some of the more well-known government lawyer positions include Assistant Attorney General, Assistant State Attorney, Assistant Public Defender, staff lawyer for County and City Attorneys, and staff lawyer for the Department of Justice.

3. Criminal Law Attorneys

There are government lawyer positions in both prosecution (State Attorney) and defense (Public Defender). These offices are divided in Florida by judicial circuit and represent the interests of the people in those circuits. In addition, the Office of the Attorney General generally handles criminal work that may affect the entire state (such as organized crime or health care fraud).

4. Civil Law Attorneys

These municipal lawyers generally act as "in-house counsel" to represent the civil needs of cities or counties within a state.

3. Government Agencies

The majority of government organizations, departments, offices, and agencies employ lawyers. The most recognizable include the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Department of Transportation. The work undertaken by each of these entities is in the public interest.

1. The Judiciary

A judge is a public servant, sworn to devote his or her efforts to uphold the laws and Constitution, eschewing all private interests. Judges often employ law clerks to assist them with their duties. This type of clerkship is often a training ground for young lawyers. Judicial clerkships of all levels are considered prestigious positions to pursue.

The areas and issues addressed in public service law include but are not limited to:

Civil Rights and Liberties
Employment: Labor Relations, Unemployment
AIDS Law
Prisoners' Rights
Consumer Protection
Housing: Landlord/Tenant, Shelters, Homelessness
Health and Medicine
Family and Children: Matrimonial Issues, Child Custody and Support,
Child Abuse and Neglect
Education: School Law, Deteriorating Facilities, Declining Resources,
Adequacy of Educational Programs, Illiteracy, School Safety, Special
Education Law
Racial/Ethnic Justice
Criminal Defense and Prosecution
Municipal Representation
Lesbian/Gay Rights
Native American Rights
Community Economic Development
Migrant and Farmworker Law
Disability Law
Rights of the Institutionalized
International Human Rights