

PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIPS

Law fellowships are post-graduate attorney positions with public interest or public service organizations. Like judicial clerkships, fellowships are temporary positions that last for one or two years. Unlike graduate study or teaching fellowships in other disciplines, law fellowships are generally staff attorney positions.

Fellows work full time in an area of law or on a particular project that is of interest to the employing agency. The work can encompass matters the employer generally handles in its normal practice; the fellow is simply another attorney hired to help handle the agency's existing caseload. Or the work can establish a new area of practice or type of work that the employing agency wants to handle but has been unable to staff.

Fellowships offer many benefits to the law graduate, including:

- **Entry into an organization that normally hires experienced attorneys.** Funding often limits the number of positions at agencies so they often hire experienced attorneys, particularly those with litigation experience. Successful fellowship applicants are generally hired right out of law school.
- **The opportunity to develop expertise in a particular area of the law.** Fellows gain concentrated experience that makes them more marketable candidates for permanent positions.
- **The chance to create a new area of practice or expand the scope of the employer's existing caseload.** The employing agency often wants to have the work that was done during the fellowship term continue on a permanent basis. The fellow who has been doing the work for a year or more and gained experience with the employer and clients in that area of law, is often in an excellent position to continue as a regular staff attorney if a spot becomes available, or to be hired for similar work at another agency.
- **The chance to establish contacts that may be useful in finding a post-fellowship position with another, even similar, employer.** If the employing agency is not able to hire the fellow in a permanent staff attorney position following the fellowship term, agency colleagues are networking contacts for a job search.

FUNDING SOURCES

Fellowships may be funded by the employing agency itself. A fellow will work on the types of cases or projects that the agency already handles. The Bet Tzedek Public Interest Law Fellowships in California, for example, are awarded to fellows who will represent clients in the range of civil and administrative matters handled by its office.

Fellowships may also be funded by outside sources, such as bar associations, foundations, or similar entities, for work that provides direct services to targeted populations (underrepresented groups, clients living in a particular geographic area, the homeless, battered women, Mexican immigrants, etc.) or that strengthens public interest legislation. Many fellowships fit into this category, including the Equal Justice Works, Skadden, and Philadelphia Bar Association Public

Interest Fellowships. Some fellowships are awarded for work done with a particular agency chosen by the funding organization.

APPLYING

Depending on the fellowship, students interested in doing a fellowship after graduation might apply in one of several ways:

- **To the employer.** The process is similar to one in any other job application, particularly if the employer has received fellowship funding directly.
- **To the funding organization and the employer separately.** The funding organization will set limits on the type of work the fellow will do, or it may limit the choice of employers. The Philadelphia Bar Association, for example, sponsors the Philadelphia Public Interest Fellowship, which is awarded for public interest work done for an agency from a specific list of area employers.
- **To the employer initially and then, in conjunction with the employer, to the funding organization.** The Skadden Fellowships require this kind of application process. The student must find a qualifying employer willing to sponsor a Skadden Fellow. Then the student and the employer together develop a project proposal. A typical project allows the employer to provide additional legal services, often to a new group of clients that the agency has not previously had the staff to help. Once a project is developed, the employer joins the student in a joint application to the funding organization. In this process, the student applicant, the employing agency, and the proposed project are judged individually and each must be approved for a fellowship to be awarded.

TYPES OF WORK

Fellowships are tremendously varied in the work they offer. Equal Justice Works, for example, awards multiple fellowships each year for projects covering an array of issues and client categories that rarely duplicate each other. Recent Equal Justice Works fellowships were awarded for legal services provided to homeless persons, juvenile detainees, native Alaskans, homeless gay and lesbian youths, the poor in various geographic locations, battered women, abused children, and those receiving welfare benefits, among others. Issues and areas of law included employment rights, the right to housing, Native Alaskan treaty rights and issues of self-governance, welfare reform, access to health care, and consumer fraud. Some fellowships are intended to advance the legal and/or civil rights of narrow segments of the population, or to cover narrow issues. The National Asian-Pacific American Legal Consortium recently offered a one-year fellowship for work to be done in Washington, DC on anti-Asian violence.

Some fellowships are not designed to provide just direct legal services but, also, to give assistance in related areas. Some fellows at the American Civil Liberties Union work on lobbying matters designed to bring about legislative reform. The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium Fellows work on civil rights litigation, public education, public policy development, and advocacy in specific areas that impact the Asian Pacific American community.

Fellows often work on the kinds of cases that every law student dreams about, “impact litigation” cases. These may be cases of first impression or may involve cutting-edge issues of law; they are always cases that will affect large numbers of people, most of whom are not parties to the case but whose rights will be affected by its outcome.

There are other, sometimes very creative, fellowship programs. For instance, some large law firms will allow one of their first-year associates to spend that first year of employment with the firm working at a public interest agency; the firm will pay a salary to the fellow and provide benefits. The Philadelphia Public Interest Fellowships are an example of this type of program.

Then there are other fellowships that provide health benefits along with a monthly stipend, like the Jesse Marvin Unruh Assembly Fellowship Program, (one of the nation's oldest and most prestigious legislative fellowship programs). It introduces individuals to public policy formation and adoption in the California Legislature through full-time work as professional legislative staff members.

Some fellowships are designed for applicants from particular segments of the law school population. The Rick Sutherland Fellowship of the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund, for example, is geared for minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged law school graduates who work on environmental matters with Earthjustice. The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press funds the Jack Nelson Legal Fellowship for former news reporters. Many fellowships, however, are open to all law students across the country.

FINANCES

Fellowships offer a level of compensation comparable to that of judicial law clerks. Sometimes fellows also receive excellent benefits. For instance, in addition to the annual salary and routine benefits, the Skadden Fellowship Program pays the debt service on Fellows' student loans for the duration of the fellowship, either one or two years. Equal Justice Works Fellowships offer similar salaries and benefits, including loan repayment assistance.

WHEN TO APPLY

Some organizations seek applications from 2Ls, often in the spring or summer. Others will accept applications from students during their graduation year, primarily in the fall, and sometimes as late as March. Students should apply as soon as possible for fellowships in which they are interested, whether there is a specific or a rolling deadline. Just as in the private sector, employers often will hire as soon as they find qualified applicants and may not wait until the advertised deadline passes.

Fellowships that involve a joint application from the student and the employer together present special deadline issues. The Skadden Fellowship Program falls into this category. While the advertised deadline to apply for a Skadden Fellowship is in late September or early October, there are earlier, hidden deadlines that interested students must establish for themselves so they may complete each step of the application process in a timely manner. Students face an initial "deadline" to locate employers that qualify as potential fellowship sponsors. They then need to apply to and secure the agreement of at least one agency to sponsor them as fellows. This must be completed early enough to allow the student and agency sufficient time to develop and draft a project and complete the fellowship application form in time to meet the only advertised deadline.

APPLICATION MATERIALS

Employers and funding organizations may request, in addition to a resume, one or more writing samples, a law transcript, and a list of two to three references. Include a cover letter, even if not specifically requested, which addresses any work or other experience that will demonstrate an interest in the work of the employing agency. Some organizations require a statement of interest and/or commitment to the work involved; this statement is essentially a cover letter. It may be

necessary to submit a project proposal, the organization's own application form, or a personal statement. Occasionally students will be asked to submit letters of recommendation, rather than just a list of references.

RESOURCES FOR FINDING FELLOWSHIPS

The following websites and books (available in the Career Services Resource Room) are available to students interested in locating fellowships.

- The *Career Services website*, www.law.wnec.edu/careerservices. Provides links to fellowship information sites.
- The *NALP public service website*, www.pslawnet.org. Lists fellowships by type, location, and application deadline.
- *Environmental Law Guide*. Both environmental law and natural resources law.
- *The Comprehensive Fellowship Guide – The Ultimate Resource for Law Students and Lawyers*. This guide is produced by the Public Service Law Network and contains information on numerous fellowship opportunities.