



## Applying for a Public Good Legal Position\*

Securing any position in the legal field can be a daunting task. Public good positions especially take a bit of finesse. The biggest piece of advice: do not go at it alone! Please utilize your resources, which includes reviewing materials like these and engaging with experts at the law school as well as others you have connected with (e.g. professional mentors) or who are knowledgeable about a particular area (e.g. faculty in a field). This document is meant to offer some baseline assistance in preparing for various stages of public good applications. For more comprehensive resources, visit the [CDO Handbook](#) and [Guide on Application Materials](#). Contact Dean Freeman – [afreeman@law.du.edu](mailto:afreeman@law.du.edu) – or your CDO counselor at [careers@law.du.edu](mailto:careers@law.du.edu) for individualized support.

\*We utilize the term public good to refer to government positions, nonprofit positions, and private public interest firms (i.e. private firms that are mission based; this tends to include civil rights firms, immigration firms, plaintiff side employment firms, and criminal defense firms). The tips can generally be helpful for judicial positions as well. \*

## Writing an Effective Public Good Cover Letter

The cover letter/statement of interest is a critical part of the public good application process. Public Good employers certainly care about what you've done, but they also want to know who you are: What are your values? What has led you to be interested in this type of work? Why do you care about the issue/community/client/cause? Show them why you are passionate in addition to sharing the skills you will bring to the position.

The following framework is recommended:

- General:
  - You should submit a one page letter (unless you are an experienced lawyer).
  - Avoid using 10 point font and under. Spacing can sometimes be that small, but font should really be at least size 11 with standard fonts (e.g., Times New Roman, Cambria, Calibri, Garamond).
- Opening paragraph (or two depending):
  - Try to tell a story or an anecdote that displays your passion/interest in the public good more broadly and/or a specific issue (if related to the org). Start with that story! If you have a personal connection to the work, this is a great time to highlight that. But even if you don't, what makes you care? What drives you? Was it a class you took? A book you read? A value your family/friends/professors instilled in you? An experience you witnessed? At the end you can tie it to the organization you are applying to, but hook them first! Please don't open the letter informing them which year you are in law school. You can share that later! Be unique and tell them about you.
  - Be sure to include a transition/closing sentence that does tell them what you're applying to, e.g. This is why I am eager to apply to a summer 2023 position with X office.
- Next one-three paragraphs (depending on your experience and space left to utilize):
  - Here is where you discuss the skills you will bring to the position. If you haven't had any legal experience yet, that's ok! Think about transferable skills: communication (orally and in writing); time management; work ethic; project management; organizational skills; navigating conflict; demonstrating responsibility; working with many different populations; and so on. Of course any experience engaging in any level of research or writing should be highlighted too.
  - Consider pulling these skills from a range of experiences: your coursework, your paid positions; your internships; your volunteer/service work; your extracurricular activities. Whether you were a babysitter,

barista, policy analyst, or volunteered at a place of worship and so on – you learned something that will be valuable to a new work environment.

- Closing paragraph:

- Express enthusiasm for the office and position. Here you can mention something specific about the office if you haven't already done so. This could include a referral, someone you met, something you read about, something you're particularly excited about, etc.
- Offer the key details, as much as you know them at the time in which you're sending the letter. Such key details could include: generally when are you available to work (e.g. approximately June – August); what else you included as part your application; if you have any critical restrictions (e.g. I can only work remotely; I can only work part-time; etc.).
- Express gratitude: Thank them for their time!

Overall, while it is helpful to explain why you are particularly excited about the work of the organization, **spend the overwhelming majority of this letter talking about you.** They know what they do – they don't know you!

## Preparing for a Public Good Interview

Interviews are stressful...but they can also be exciting! They are a critical step into hopefully landing a position working with an organization you're excited about on behalf of a cause/client/community you care about.

In general, be sure to:

- Think through and prepare responses to some common questions (listed below) and practice saying them ALOUD. It is very different to say things in your head. When you speak out loud, you will be able to know if you actually have something to say or you need to brainstorm more responses! You will also be able to time yourself – sometimes we don't realize how long or short we are speaking! You can practice alone or with a trusted person. Of course you should also do official mock interviews, but even after that keep practicing at on your own.
- There is no way you can anticipate every question that will be asked. Don't worry about it! Do the best you can!
- Generally when answering, show don't tell! Try to give life to your responses with examples in practice.
- Do some research on the office. Google them, review their website. Have they been in the news lately? You don't need to be an expert on every case they've argued but showing that you've done level of homework is helpful.
- Clarify whether the interview is in person, over Zoom/Teams, or on the phone. Be sure they have your contact info if there is an issue with an Internet connection.
- If the interview is on Zoom, don't have notes in front of you. It is very obvious when you are reading or reviewing materials on the screen. Whether in person or virtual, do have a notebook/pen to take notes on their comments.
- Unless deliberately instructed otherwise by the placement, wear a suit or a blazer/pants if you don't have a suit.
- If you can find out who is interviewing you prior, that's helpful, but don't pester them. They are busy!
- Commonly, interviewers ask **behavioral questions**, questions designed to assess your past and future performance.<sup>1</sup> A variety of behavioral questions are included in the sample questions below. An interviewer may ask you to provide an example of a time you demonstrated a particular skill required of the position, or they may ask how you handled or faced a specific situation or assignment. When presented with a behavioral question about past performance during an interview, many people suggest you frame your responses using the **STAR** method, which consists of the following:
  - **Situation or Task:** Provide context for the interviewer. Provide a brief overview of your position. Explain the problem or issue you faced while completing a specific project. You should seek to humanize the situation for the employer by providing relevant details.
  - **Action:** Describe the steps you completed or skills you used to address the problem or issue. Use this opportunity to highlight strengths and skills you could bring to the position.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: this behavior question section and analysis is slightly adapted and taken from Harvard Law School's Job Search Toolkit, <https://hls.harvard.edu/bernard-koteen-office-of-public-interest-advising/opia-job-search-toolkit/interview-questions/#behavioral-questions>.

- **Result:** Summarize the result or lessons learned while addressing the issue
- **Hypos** are also becoming more common.<sup>2</sup> This involves a hypothetical situation related to a project, supervisor, or other workplace issue and you are asked to develop a response. An ethical question may also be raised. They are trying to evaluate how well you reason and analyze and how clearly you think and speak. Your ability to articulate your response is often more important than coming up with the right answer or being an expert on the relevant case law. Typically there is no right/wrong answer. These fact patterns often do not have clear-cut legal answers. The interviewer will be evaluating your ability to respond to ethical concerns and your commitment to their mission. The interviewer also will be assessing how you react to a situation under pressure, your thought process to reach your decision, and your ability to defend your decisions when challenged. Oftentimes they are testing your allegiance to your client – make sure you know who the client is! This often comes up in government interviews.

### **Most Common Interview Questions from Public Good Placements:**

- **Personal:**
  - Some form of “tell me about yourself” / tell me why you are in law school / tell me why you want to do public interest / this type of work
  - Why DU
  - Strengths/weaknesses/areas of growth
    - No need to come up with something here that isn’t true; be candid but try to also say how you work through the weakness/manage it
  - How do you handle secondary/vicarious trauma? How will you handle potential for burnout? What’s your resiliency plan? How do you cope when things are emotionally and mentally hard/draining?
    - These sorts of questions relate to the intense nature of public good work; you can admit if you’re still working on navigating these challenges but say something at least about your plans to manage. They like to invest in people who have thought about these things and are trying to be here for the long haul.
  - What are you most proud of/biggest accomplishment
  - What’s been a challenge you’ve had to navigate and how have you gotten through it
  - Discuss a time that you failed at something
  - Favorite/least favorite law school class; hardest law school class; favorite professor
  - What book are you reading right now
    - You can admit if right now all you’re reading is your law book, but be able to respond with something that you recently read before the hubbub of the semester!
  - What’s been the hardest component of law school
  - What do you like to do for fun
  - If you weren't in law school, what would you be doing right now
  - What does public interest, social justice, public good, civil rights etc. mean to you
  - What type of responsibilities have you had in prior work experiences; what did you particularly like/dislike about that work
  - What skills will you bring to this position/office
  - What is your advocacy style
  - What do you want to be known for (generally, by your colleagues, by your clients)
  - How will you deal with a “difficult/emotional/insistent etc. client”
  - Why did or didn’t you pursue Law Review/Moot Court/Clinic
  - What activities did you participate in/are you involved in any activities outside of law school; What’s your favorite and why

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- Describe a situation where you assumed a leadership role
- How would you contribute to our office's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging
- Short/long term goals (consider goals as it relates to this position, law school, your degree); what will you be doing in 5 or 10 years
- Tell me about a time when you worked as part of a team with diverse perspectives and/or backgrounds
- Do you work best in a team environment or on your own
  - Hint: be sure to say you can do both – and share examples if you can!
- What mode of supervision do you prefer
- Share a time in which you received challenging feedback; what happened/how did you handle
- Describe a situation that required a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result? Or, something like: How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time?
- Give me an example of a time when you creatively and successfully solved a difficult problem.
  - Lawyers are problem solvers! Come up with anything!
- If you're moving from private sector to public, explain why; what's different now
- How much experience have you had with public interest organizations
- Know your resume!
  - Be prepared to discuss all things included, hobbies, your major, your thesis, any work gaps, etc.
- Why should we select you for this position over the other applicants?
  - No need to knock others when responding to this; it's just an opportunity to sell yourself again!
- Placement Specific:
  - Why do you want to work here (generally and as opposed to other offices that do similar work)
  - Why this practice setting or why this geographic location
  - Tell me about your experience in X (subject matter, specific relevant skill- trial, engaging with clients, legislative drafting, etc.).
    - It's ok if you don't have it – but explain why you want it and what you have done that might be relevant!
  - What do you think will be the hardest aspect of working here / biggest drawback
  - If remote/hybrid: how will you work effectively remotely
  - If you are different in some ways from the clients serve, how will you build connection with them; do you foresee any challenges engaging with our clients?
    - Generally, we are all different from our clients given that we are now in greater positions of power, even if we are law students vs. lawyers. But this is a time in which you might acknowledge that alongside any other differences, whether based on age, geography, race, status, gender identity, etc. We don't have to be the same as our clients to be able to build trusting relationships – but we do have to be aware of those differences.
  - Ethics:
    - What do you consider to be the most difficult ethical challenge lawyers in this office/ practice setting / subject area face
    - At times offices will ask you how you would handle a particular ethical challenge the office might face. This happens a lot in public defender, district attorney, federal government, and sometimes cause-based nonprofits.
      - Always be sure to say you would check with your supervisor before making a decision. You can share your gut reaction but you can also say you would need to check with the Colorado Rules of Professional Conduct first.

#### Questions to Ask Interviewers:

There will also be designated time to ask questions of your interviewers. Do not only ask about timeline/next steps for you. Consider asking something about how the office operates and also a bigger picture question. Some ideas:

- Strategy/tactics: how do they make decisions/decide clients, etc.

- Make an attempt to connect their work to a current event
- Supervision structure for your role
- Day to day of this role (extern, intern, new associate etc.)
- Greatest/hardest part of their job
- Commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion DEI
- How would they describe the work culture

Don't forget – you likely won't have a lot of time for questions. There may be future opportunities – in other interviews or before you accept an offer. Typically limit your questions to two if you are still a student!

## **Writing a Public Good Resume**

Resumes are fairly standard in the legal profession, whether applying for a public good or private sector position. Please review the [CDO's Guide on Application Materials](#) on pages 12-20 to get advice on your resume, including structure, format, and what to include. The only things we will lift up:

- Generally you should keep your resume to one page UNLESS you are applying to a post-graduate position, particularly a public interest fellowship, which encourages you to list all relevant experience, regardless of length, and/or have significant experience prior to law school (e.g. at least 5 years of pre law school experience). Even with that experience, if you can get it to the one page without losing too much, do so!
- Overall, now is not the time to be shy about your volunteer or service activities. Include them (assuming it doesn't make the resume too long!).
- Avoid using too many different fonts or sizes on your resume! Avoid anything less than 10 point font and even use 10 point font very sparingly!
- Know that you will re-write and add to your resume regularly throughout your journey at DU. It is an evolving document and some things that make it on there your 1L year may no longer be there in your 3L year because of additional new experiences.