



## Episode 101: Preparing for a Career in Public Interest Law (with Ashely Matthews of Equal Justice Works)

Alison Monahan: Welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today, we're talking with Ashley Matthews, who's the Program Manager for Law School Engagement and Advocacy at Equal Justice Works, about preparing for a career in public interest work. Today, your Law School Toolbox host is Alison Monahan. That's me. Normally, I'm with Lee Burgess, my cohost. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be.

We're the co-creators of the [Law School Toolbox](#), the [Bar Exam Toolbox](#), and the Catapult Career Conference. I also run [The Girl's Guide to Law School](#). If you enjoy the show, please leave a [review](#), and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the [contact form on lawschooltoolbox.com](#) and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back. Today, we're talking with Ashley Matthews, Program Manager for Law School Engagement and Advocacy at Equal Justice Works, about preparing for a career in public interest work. Ashley, welcome.

Ashley Matthews: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Alison Monahan: Oh, it's totally our pleasure. Let's jump right in. A lot of people go to law school because they're hoping to do public interest work, they want to do something good for the world. But, let's face it, it can be a real struggle to find those jobs and to afford to be able to take them. What do you see is the main challenges facing people who would like a career in public interest work?

Ashley Matthews: That's a great question. You actually hit the nail right on the head. The biggest challenges facing those who want to go into public interest law are the staggering amount of law school loans that most people have to take out to go to law schools.

Alison Monahan: Yes, which we are going to talk about in detail later.

Ashley Matthews: Yes. That's the biggest number one hurdle. [The average law school graduate has upwards of six figures of student debt](#), usually somewhere around \$150,000 or more. That's not including any loans taken out for undergraduate work.

Alison Monahan: That's just crazy.

Ashley Matthews: Right. There's a huge, huge amount of student debt, while the average entry-level attorney for a public interest law organization makes around \$48,000 a year. That's a huge disparity there and it's a real obstacle for people who are thinking about pursuing public interest law. Another thing is actually finding those jobs. I think back in the 80s and maybe early 90s, there was a widespread misconception that public interest law, that's not a competitive practice area and that's not a prestigious practice area. This is so far from the truth.

Applying for public interest law jobs can be just as competitive, if not more competitive, than applying for your more traditional private law firm gigs. Actually finding these jobs and landing one of these jobs can be very, very difficult. Once you actually get this job, reports have actually shown that public interest lawyers are way happier than most private attorneys. However, there's still problems staying committed, you might get a little bit of compassion fatigue, it's really, really difficult. While it's still important and critical services, it's really, really difficult work. Those are the three main things: the student debt, actually finding the job, and then staying committed.

Alison Monahan: I think all of those are great and I want to break those down a little bit more. Let's put aside the debt issue for a second, because I think that's a huge one. I think what you're saying about people having a misconception about finding these jobs is totally accurate. I went to law school at Columbia and people were really competing there to work for, say, the ACLU or The Bronx Defenders. Sometimes people would come to us and they'd say, "Well, I think I can go to some no-name law school and I'll just get a public interest job." That's not really the case, right?

Ashley Matthews: Not at all, no. The competition is really, really fierce for these jobs. In order to stand out for them, you really have to go the extra mile and you have to really, really show your dedication and commitment.

Alison Monahan: What are some ways that people can do that? If somebody's listening to this and they're like, "Oh gosh, well, I'm not at a top school. Is my dream over?"

Ashley Matthews: Right. No, it's definitely not. The good thing about public interest law is that it's really about your passion and it's really easy to demonstrate your passion. The best thing that you can do is go out into your community and help people. Really, really get to know the client populations that you want to serve. If you want to work with veterans, the easiest way to do that is to start volunteering with veterans. If you want to help juveniles, you can start working with children. Get out there, put yourself out there, and actually start volunteering.

Hopefully you're doing this through either student pro bono or an internship or a clinic, but if you don't get accepted for those things, don't take that as, "Okay, this isn't the career for me." You can still go out even as a law student and just put in some volunteer hours at a local community organization. Put yourself out there the best way you can because those experiences are really going to back

up your resume when it's time to actually apply for jobs. The more experience you have, the more passion that you can demonstrate and actually prove, the easier it will be for you to break into the public interest law world.

Alison Monahan: I've heard that that's true. My law school roommate was very public interest-oriented. She actually, at some point, stopped even looking at her grades because she said, "My grades are not what's going to get me the job. What's going to get me the job is the people that I've met through doing the massive amount of work that I've been doing for internships and pro bono and that sort of thing."

One question I have is sometimes people say, "Well, I came to law school, I wanted to do public interest work, but I had to take the big law job to pay off my loans. It's not a problem because I can just pro bono my way into a public interest career." Do you think that's accurate?

Ashley Matthews: Yes and no. Pro bono is always very, very important. If you have to take a private job to help pay back loans, that's completely valid and that's completely normal. In fact, just as a little aside here, a lot of people think that our [Equal Justice Works Fellowships](#) are only open to recent law grads, but that's not actually true. You can actually apply for an Equal Justice Works Fellowship if you've been working for a more traditional private corporate job and you want to break into public interest law. You could actually be an experienced attorney and apply for an Equal Justice Works Fellowship.

There are ways to get back into public interest law, but doing pro bono work is not going to be nearly as fulfilling as doing public interest law full-time. If you're really trying to make a difference in your community, it's tough to do that only putting in maybe two hours a week or ten hours a month or something like that. Pro bono is obviously very, very helpful, but if you really want to make an impact and if you really want to work with these affected communities in a bigger way, public interest law full-time is going to be the way to do it.

Alison Monahan: That sounds awesome. For people who are listening who might not be familiar with the programs that you guys offer, could you give us just a rough rundown of the different types of programs that Equal Justice Works offers? Then we'll dive a little bit more detailed into the loan issue and some other stuff.

Ashley Matthews: Got you. Okay. Obviously, the student debt help is a big part of it and we'll talk about that a little bit later. On the programmatic side, Equal Justice Works has internships available for law students through our [Rural Summer Legal Corps program](#). Those internships allow law students to go out and provide civil legal aid services to low-income rural clients all across America. Another program that we have is the Equal Justice Works Fellowships program. We have both privately funded and publicly funded fellowships.

Our private fellowships are a bit more entrepreneurial while our public fellowships are government-funded. We also have the Conference and Career Fair every October. This is the largest public service career fair in the nation for public interest law students and we usually have about 160 to 170 public interest employers from all across the nation. We all gather up in Washington DC. Actually, I take that back. We gather in Arlington, Virginia, but that's very, very close to Washington DC, so in the DMV area.

It's a lot of fun and a great place for you to find your first public interest law internship or your first public interest law job. In addition to, let's see, we've got Rural Summer Legal Corps, we've got Equal Justice Works Fellowships, we also have our [AmeriCorps JD program](#) which provides a little over \$1,000 to law students in exchange for their summer work. That money should be going towards your student loans. We provide a lot of financial help, a lot of programmatic support. We offer resources and webinars. Our whole entire mission is to mobilize the next generation of law students, so any way we can help you guys do that, we're open to doing.

Alison Monahan: That sounds awesome. All right, let's turn to a not-so-awesome topic. Let's talk about student debt. As you've already mentioned, this is, for obvious reasons, a really huge issue for most aspiring public interest attorneys. [What can people do about this?](#) What can they do to minimize their debt? What options do they have? [Is this even feasible for people to be thinking about doing?](#)

Ashley Matthews: Sure, that's a great question, too. I know on the outset looking at the staggering amount of student loans most law students have and law graduates have, it seems like it's not feasible, but it definitely, definitely is. While you're in law school, you're probably not going to be thinking about your student loans every day. It's not a fun topic to think about, but there are certain things that you could do while you're in law school to make sure that you're ready for those loans once they hit after graduation.

While you're in law school, we encourage everyone to educate yourself as much as possible. [We host webinars every month](#) on public service loan forgiveness, on income-based repayment plans, how to start a law school loan repayment assistance program. You can always look online, read as much as you can about public service loan forgiveness. Also, make sure that you apply for an AmeriCorps JD Award.

While the award is not a cash stipend, it's something that's definitely going to help you extend your grace period after you graduate. If you're on an income-based repayment plan, an AmeriCorps JD Award could stretch your grace period by up to five months or more. It can be really, really beneficial. These are things that you can do right now while you're in law school that you'll really thank yourself for later.

After you graduate, the big three, the top three options that you should definitely know about are public service loan forgiveness, income-based repayment plans, and loan repayment assistance programs. A lot of people know what public service loan forgiveness is. I won't get too much into that until we talk about it a little bit later maybe, but public service loan forgiveness will basically forgive the remaining balance on your student loans as long as you make on-time monthly payments for 10 years. You have to make at least 120 payments.

The least amount of time you could do that is 10 years, so that's 10 year, tax-free forgiveness. LRAP programs can be handled through your law school. Some law schools have amazing LRAP programs. Their students, as long as they go into public interest law, won't have to pay back their student loans until their loans are forgiven. You basically will never have to make a payment on your student loans if you have a great LRAP program. Many law schools have that LRAP.

Some employers actually have loan repayment assistance programs, the really amazing employers. They'll actually help you pay back your student loans and that can be incredibly helpful. Then there's income-based repayment plans. Income-based repayment plans are open to everyone regardless of whether you're pursuing public interest law or not. These repayment plans will basically cap your monthly payment at a percentage of your yearly income. This is going to be your adjusted gross income also taking into account your family size.

If you're unemployed, your monthly payments could be as low as zero dollars a month. The bad part about this is, obviously, that while you're making these lowered payments, your student loan is actually going to get bigger and bigger and bigger. The maximum amount of time that you could be on an income-based repayment plan is 25 years with a graduate loan. At the end of that 25 years, they're going to kick you off the income-based repayment plan, forgive all of your loans, which sounds great until you're going to get a tax bill for the remaining balance of your student loans including the interest.

If you've got \$100,000 left on your balance after 25 years and let's say you only make \$40,000 a year, they're going to tack that remaining balance and you're going to be taxed for that as income. It's going to be like you're at an income level of \$140,000 even though you're at \$40,000. You will get a tax bill for that at the end of 25 years. This is why public service loan forgiveness is so very important because public service loan forgiveness has tax-free forgiveness.

Alison Monahan: Just so I'm clear, is this the program that recently came out in [The New York Times](#) and other articles saying these people have entered this program almost 10 years ago and now they're suddenly getting letters saying like, "Oh, sorry. You didn't actually qualify. Too bad for you"?

Ashley Matthews: Yes. That is what this is about. There is some good news and there is some bad news about that. Let's start off with the bad news. The bad news is that, yes,

that's absolutely true. The Department of Education is being sued by a group of attorneys who were retroactively denied for public service loan forgiveness after being told that they were qualified for almost nine years.

Alison Monahan: Which is crazy.

Ashley Matthews: Right. That's absolutely crazy and it's confusing and it's disorienting and it's frustrating. It's a lot of different things. These are lawyers from organizations like the American Bar Association, the American Immigration Lawyers Association, and the ACLU. Just to give a little background leading into the somewhat good news, the background is that these organizations have 501(c)(6) or 501(c)(4) status, so they're not regular nonprofits. A regular nonprofit is a 501(c)(3).

The Department of Education is looking at these organizations as if they're trade organizations providing member services or that they're lobbying. The Department of Education issued a reversal explanation basically stating that they don't believe these attorneys were engaging in direct public legal services or public education. Public service loan forgiveness authorizes only public education and public interest legal services.

They don't believe these lawyers are actually providing direct legal services. We'll have to see how this case turns out. This is a huge thing for public interest law students who may want to work for the ACLU or for the ABA and so that's a huge thing. The good news though is that if you work for a 501(c)(3), you don't have to worry about this. If you work for the government or if you work for a regular nonprofit, this is not going to apply to you.

Even if the rules change and the current administration decides to completely take away public service loan forgiveness, we truly do not believe that this is going to affect current borrowers already pursuing public service loan forgiveness. It would only affect future borrowers. Now if you do want to work for a 501(c)(6) or a 501(c)(4), there's going to be some extra scrutiny.

The best thing that you could do, if you're worried, is to make sure that you are filling out your public service loan forgiveness employment verification every single year. Back it up with paperwork, make copies, make copies of everything. Record conversations with your loan service provider. I hate that I actually have to say that, but this case, a lot of loan service providers have already come out and said, "It's not our obligation to do consumer education." It's really up to us. We're lawyers, we're law students, we're smart enough to do this, so just make sure that you back up everything with paperwork.

Alison Monahan: Oh, my understanding is that these were people who did submit that and were told they qualified. Now they're saying, "Oh actually, sorry, you didn't." Is that accurate or is that a misconception I have?

Ashley Matthews: No, no. That's actually completely accurate. The reason why they're able to sue the Department of Education is because they do have that paperwork backing up what they're saying. Let's just say that they didn't have any paperwork, they had not been filling out their employment verification for those years and then all of a sudden, it's 2000 ... Okay, just a little background.

The College Cost and Reduction Access Act of 2007, I believe, started public service loan forgiveness. The first time anyone is able to actually receive loan forgiveness is happening this year. Let's just say they didn't fill out any verification forms since 2007, they apply in 2017, and they get denied. They would probably just think, "Oh okay, I got denied. Is there an appeals process?" Maybe not, maybe so. At the very most, they'd be very, very upset, but there may not be a case there.

Because they had nine years of paperwork saying 'Approved, Approved, Approved,' and then all of a sudden in 2017, it's denied, they have a much better case to build off of and they can really lay some ground work for people, public interest lawyers who are working for organizations like the ABA and the ACLU to get approved in the future. We're really, really happy that they have that paperwork to back it up.

Alison Monahan: Got to love your lawyers with paperwork.

Ashley Matthews: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: I'm thinking back to first year contracts. I'm like, "Maybe there's a promissory estoppel claim here." They reasonably relied on these representations.

Ashley Matthews: Exactly. Yeah. It's not quite the group that's going to go away quietly with that.

Alison Monahan: No. Exactly. It's so interesting because I think a lot of ... let me back up, actually. I had one question. The position you guys, or your best guess, is that say someone's enrolled in this program and they've been in it for three or four years. They're in a 501(c)(3), they're qualifying, they're working for the government, whatever. You think even if things change, that they're essentially going to be grandfathered in for those 10 years?

Ashley Matthews: Yes. That's our understanding of it. Obviously, we can't predict the future, but they've never ever changed something and then retroactively applied it. If it's taken away, we truly, truly believe that everyone who's currently eligible for public service loan forgiveness will still be eligible for public service loan forgiveness. This is more than likely going to affect future borrowers.

Alison Monahan: All right. Let's cross our fingers and hope.

Ashley Matthews: Yeah, cross our fingers, and we're right on top of this. This is our day job. This is what we do at Equal Justice Works. In order to support public interest lawyers

and law students, we definitely try to advocate heavily for public service loan forgiveness and make sure that there's no miseducation being spread out about what it is and who it benefits. We are definitely on top of all of it.

We send out legislative updates to everybody on our mailing list and it's something that we care deeply about. We know without public service loan forgiveness, a lot of people would not do this work. We've actually issued a report about that based on findings of a survey that we did and overwhelmingly, the numbers were so high. It was, like, 95% of people said they would not pursue public interest law if public service loan forgiveness were taken away.

Alison Monahan: How could you if you've got to pay \$2,000 a month for your loans?

Ashley Matthews: Exactly, and it's not like this legal need is going to go away once the lawyers go away. There's an overwhelming need for civil legal aid assistance and criminal legal aid assistance, indigent defense. The need is not going anywhere. There's a huge, huge justice gap in the United States of America. If public service loan forgiveness were taken away, that need would just get bigger and bigger.

Alison Monahan: Sure. If people are listening to this and they're thinking, "I want to do something about this. I want to be on board," what, if anything, can they do to reach out to people, get involved? What are the options?

Ashley Matthews: Right now, we're gearing up to basically make sure that legislators stay educated about public service loan forgiveness and who it benefits. If you want to get involved, you can email us at [studentdebt@equaljusticeworks.org](mailto:studentdebt@equaljusticeworks.org) and we can figure out a way to work you into our campaigning. Even if it's just writing a testimony to your legislator letting them know how much public service loan forgiveness means to you, that would go a long way.

Obviously right now with PSLF, if anything were to change, the vehicle through which it would change would be the Higher Education Acts Reauthorization. That's been on the back burner for a long time. Sometimes it feels like all of the balls are up the air with public service loan forgiveness, but we can say right now that public service loan forgiveness is kind of safe right now.

The best thing you could do is just to stay educated, make sure you're on the up and up about everything that's happening with public service loan forgiveness. Keep your eye on the ABA lawsuit against the Department of Education to see whether they're going to actually stop these retroactive denials of ABA and ACLU attorneys. That's pretty much all we can do right now, and make sure our legislators are informed about who this program actually benefits, which are their low-income constituents, to be honest. By having public service loan forgiveness, these lawyers are able to go out and serve poor clients.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a great way of looking at it. Talk to me a little bit more about LRAP programs. You said in passing some schools have great ones,

which implies some don't. If I'm an incoming law student, I'm pretty sure I want to go into public service work, what should I be looking at to evaluate whether the schools I'm considering have good or not so great LRAPs?

Ashley Matthews: I would also say, and this might sound kind of sad, but if they have an LRAP at all, it's a good LRAP.

Alison Monahan: It's better than nothing.

Ashley Matthews: Some law schools have no LRAPs at all. Equal Justice Works, on our website if you go to [www.equaljusticeworks.org](http://www.equaljusticeworks.org) and go to our Educational Debt section, we have a [list of all of the law schools who have current LRAP programs](#). If you're a pre-law student or if you're already in law school, you can check out that list to make sure that your law school is on it. Now if your law school is not on it, that's what we would call a bad LRAP because there is none.

We want every law school to have them, but the law schools with the great LRAPs, the law schools with the excellent, excellent LRAPs, they really provide an avenue for their students to pursue any public interest law job they want regardless of that salary. Those law schools, the great ones, will really cover a huge percentage of those monthly payments. Some law schools have LRAP loans, meaning that they buy your loans and then you have a new LRAP loan that's pretty much forgiven. As long as you work at a public interest law job full-time for a certain amount of years, you would get those LRAP disbursements. But every law school has a different LRAP. There are so many different ways people fund LRAPs. Some law students fund them, some law school deans take on the fundraising aspect. Some LRAPs are run through the law school's Office of Development. There are so many different ways.

If you are a law student and you're interested in starting an LRAP, we definitely want to hear from you because we are trying to help mobilize law students to really advocate for the things that they need in order to pursue public interest law. Sometimes it can take a long time to set up an LRAP program depending on whether your law school is hip to the idea. Some law schools may not want to do it and it might take a lot of convincing in order to get law schools on board with LRAPs.

Generally speaking, if your law school has an LRAP program, it makes a strong statement in support of public interest law. It lets pre-law students and everyone else know that you take public interest law seriously. Just from a development and fundraising aspect, a lot of law schools after law students graduate, they send them emails and phone calls saying, "Hey, wouldn't you like to give back to the law school?" It's so much easier to ask recent law grads for money when you say, "This is actually going towards our LRAP program that's going to support low-income legal services." That's a much better fundraising pitch than just "Give us money" for no apparent reason.

Alison Monahan: Right, for the library so we can build another story of offices.

Ashley Matthews: Right.

Alison Monahan: I'm like, "No, my law school already has a lot of money. I'm pretty sure they can live without my donation to build more offices." But yeah, of course. If it's a public interest group that reaches out to me, I'm probably a lot more willing to open my wallet and feel good about that.

Ashley Matthews: Right, and research has shown that people are much more willing to give when it's for something like that as opposed to, like you said, something more general, law school operation expense or something like that. LRAP programs are awesome, but like I said, it can be a bit of an uphill battle to get one if your school is not on the good law school list of LRAP programs. If they're on the naughty list, make sure you go and speak with your dean or speak with your Office of Financial Aid and get a feel for why you don't have an LRAP. There may be a good reason. See if they're open to having an LRAP program.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. Even if your school does have one, that's a great starting point. I always caution people to really be sure that you understand what it's going to cover, what happens if you get married, that kind of thing. I hear a lot of stories from classmates who are like, "Well, I thought it was going to be really great and it was really great for a couple of years, but then life happened and suddenly I was having a lot more issues or they weren't paying stuff. I just wish I had done a little more investigating about what I was getting into."

Ashley Matthews: Yeah. Definitely do your research. You'll hear me say that a lot, but consumer education is the most important thing when it comes to student debt. We have to do this hard work ourselves, and a lot of times when we sign that master promissory note as a 1L, we're so excited to go to law school. We're so excited to fulfill maybe this lifelong career dream that we've had, that we don't really think about what exactly we're signing up for or the vast amount of student loans that we're signing up for.

It's not until maybe we're in bar exam hell that we really start thinking about the fact that we have these looming loan payments coming up. Anything that you could do on the front end while you're in law school is going to be helpful. Find out about LRAP programs. Investigate whether employers that you might want to work with, whether they have an LRAP program. There are also federal LRAP programs. If you're a public defender or a prosecutor, there's the John R. Justice ... yeah, I believe it's the [John R. Justice LRAP](#).

There used to be a civil legal aid LRAP called CLAARP, but they de-funded it. That's something we're looking into right now maybe seeing if there's some type of advocacy interest in fighting for CLAARP to come back, or maybe some kind of new reinvigorated CLAARP. That's something we're always thinking about at Equal Justice Works. If you guys have any ideas about how to help curb

the student debt problem for public interest lawyers, we're always open to suggestions, brainstorming. We love working with young lawyers and students on these issues.

Alison Monahan: Fantastic. All right, let's move on from that depressing topic. Say I'm an incoming law student, I'm listening to this. I'm dead set on doing public interest work, this is what I want to go to law school to do. What do I need to be focusing on, in your opinion? Should I be looking at grades, internships, summer jobs? What are public interest employers really looking for here?

Ashley Matthews: This is a really interesting conversation. A lot of times, what public interest employers want is a lot different from what a private or a corporate or a law firm might want. You might hear some people say that grades don't matter at all for public interest law. I actually don't think that's true. I think the better your grades are, the smoother that transition to employment will be. It can't hurt, you know?

Alison Monahan: Exactly. It's not going to hurt you to have great grades.

Ashley Matthews: Yeah. It's never going to hurt you to have really good grades. It's not even necessarily because it proves that you're a really smart cookie, it's not that. What really is important about having good grades is that it proves to your professors that you're trustworthy, that you're capable, and it's going to make for a much, much better network for you. Your professors have a lot of connections.

Your professors are very well-respected, they move in many different circles, and so [your professors are going to be crucial to actually helping you get a job](#). The better your grades are, the easier it's going to be to ask them for help. They're going to be able to provide you letters of recommendation, they're going to be able to connect you through email or through coffee or through whatever to actual public interest lawyers or any type of lawyer.

This doesn't even go for public interest law. Any type of law that you want to practice, your professors can be really, really crucial to helping you. If you downplay your professors and their role in the law school, it's going to make it a little bit harder. You're not going to have access to a really, really awesome ally. That's why professors are so important and grades can be really important. That also goes for things like law review, clinics.

Any time you can connect with actual lawyers, actual public interest attorneys, those connections are going to be incredibly crucial. Grades should not just be an afterthought. If you don't have the best grades, the good news is that that doesn't count you out for public interest law the way it might with a corporate job. You don't have to have the highest grades in your class to get a public interest law job.

Really what public interest employers look for is experience and passion. Internships should really be a primary focus. Experience really counts for a lot, especially if you're working with low-income and marginalized populations, so you want to get as familiar with your client population as possible. Some newer public interest attorneys might think that they want to work on a particular practice area, but if they don't have a familiarity with the client population, it could be very, very difficult for them to continue that kind of work.

If you've never worked with a homeless population, if you've never worked with drug users, if you've never worked with troubled children, if you've never worked with an immigrant population, it's going to be really hard to convince a public interest employer to let you walk into their organization and take control of a caseload. You have to really prove that you're familiar with the client population, that you're passionate about it, and that you've got the experience to back it up.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think that's right. Sometimes people have this romantic idea of like, "Oh, I'm just going to waltz in and save the world" and the people who do this work are like, "You have no idea what you're getting into."

Ashley Matthews: Exactly. That's why I said. There can be a lot of rejection as a law student. We can get rejected for a lot of things, but if you don't get an internship, don't let that be a closed door. There are so many different ways to volunteer. A lot of times, public interest lawyers are working with extremely needy populations, but they aren't the only ones.

There are social workers, there are community centers, there are other nonprofits. Call those organizations and see if they have a place for you as a law student in their organization even if it's just volunteering a couple of hours a week. That's going to count for something and it could still go on your resume as experience. That's going to count for a lot when you go to apply for jobs.

Alison Monahan: I think that's a great idea. Even if you're not doing strictly legal work, I think just getting exposure to those communities and what it would actually be like to work in that type of environment with that type of person would probably go a long way to showing that you're really serious about this. One question, how much does it matter what people have done before law school?

Ashley Matthews: That's a great question, too. We see this a lot even applying for Equal Justice Works programs. The answer is that sometimes it matters and sometimes it doesn't matter. You have to think about whether the work that you did before law school is directly relevant to the job that you're applying for now. If it's directly relevant, then of course, you definitely want to put that on your resume. You definitely want to talk about that and how it led to you going to law school and why it led to you wanting to go into this particular practice area.

But if it's just general nonprofit work or maybe a one-off day of volunteering, it won't really count so much. It might even look like you're fluffing up your resume because you do have a lack of experience. Make sure that the work that you're talking about before law school is completely directly on topic and completely relevant to the client population that you're trying to serve through full-time employment.

Alison Monahan: I think that's great advice. Probably your one week long trip to Haiti might not really get you that job.

Ashley Matthews: Right, as much as maybe some recent volunteering that you did with Haitian immigrants or the fact that maybe you even learned to speak Creole. That is going to account a lot more.

Alison Monahan: For sure. All right, tell me a little bit more about the Equal Justice Works Fellowship program. How could people get involved and who is it designed for?

Ashley Matthews: Sure. Our Equal Justice Works Fellowship is very prestigious, really competitive, and it's definitely not for everyone. It's for the entrepreneurial law graduate. The reason why you have to be a social entrepreneur is because you're basically going to be creating your own dream job that really fills a gap in legal services. We're not providing people with fellowships so they can provide really basic, general direct legal services. We're providing them with a fellowship because they're innovative and because they're doing something that no one else is doing.

It could just be that no one else is doing it in that region, so you could also replicate project ideas that are happening in another state or in another place. The whole point is that you're bringing legal services to a legal aid organization that would not be able to fulfill those services without you. You are a crucial element in the project. There are four components to an Equal Justice Works Fellowship.

There's the candidate. That's the law student. We really care about who you are. This is where your work actually before law school, it might be relevant. We want to know about who you are, what shapes you, and what drew you to your project. We're also going to look at your host organization and your host organization has to be a legal services organization, a nonprofit organization.

We don't really want you to be partnered up with a startup, we want you to be partnered with an established organization that can really provide you with things that while you're a law student you may not care about, but we want you to have access to benefits, a computer, an office, running water. (laughter). That's going to be very, very crucial in making sure that you stay committed to your cause.

We really want you to just be in a safe environment. The next thing is your actual project proposal. We want you to come up with something innovative, something that fills those gaps, if there are any holes in services. One thing that we always tell students to do, if you're thinking about a project and you're talking with a host organization about it, ask them what the holes are. They do this work day in, day out from 9:00 to 5:00, so they know where the gaps in legal services are.

Ask them what the hardest part about their job is and how you can help fill that gap. They might just tell you what they want the project to be. It may not even be rocket science. The fourth part of the Equal Justice Works Fellowship program are the sponsors. We actually find the sponsors for you. As long as you have an amazing proposal, we will work overtime to find a sponsor for that project.

The sponsors, sometimes they're anonymous, sometimes they're big, huge companies like Google or Apple or John Deere, whoever they may be. They're going to have issue preferences and geographic preferences. They may let us know, "Hey, I'm interested in funding a project that focuses on the trans community in New York" or "I want a project that focuses on veterans in Minnesota". The sky is the limit on to what they want. We're going to connect you and your project and your host organization with that funding support from sponsors.

Apps for that, applications open this June for the Equal Justice Works Fellowship. The best thing I can say if you want to get involved is to make sure that you're on our website, that you know about the deadlines. Coming up with a project proposal takes a long time. It's not something you can do overnight. This is not a project that you apply for on a whim. Sometimes people work on their project proposals for months. If you are a rising 3L meaning that you're a current 2L, right now is the perfect time for you to be pitching your project proposal to other legal aid organizations, fleshing it out, and gearing up to apply this June for a 2018 fellowship. It's a very lengthy process.

Alison Monahan: Are these one year fellowships?

Ashley Matthews: It's two year fellowships.

Alison Monahan: Nice.

Ashley Matthews: We want you to be able to continue the project beyond that, so don't just think short-term. Obviously think "Six months, a year out, two years out, where do I want the project to be?" Also think long-term, how do you want this project to continue?

Alison Monahan: That sounds really interesting. I can see how it'd be a very challenging process to get up to speed on your proposal, but it sounds like also it would be a very enriching experience to even apply even if you're not selected.

Ashley Matthews: Yeah, absolutely. We love to help people through their project. If you have a project proposal idea, you can shoot us an email and we'll be sure to talk you through it because we love applicants. We love hearing about these project proposals. If it's something good, we want to make sure it gets funded.

Alison Monahan: Okay, fantastic. What are some other ways law students can get involved with Equal Justice Works if they're not quite ready to step up to that fellowship proposal?

Ashley Matthews: Yeah, sure. We have a student rep program. Our Equal Justice Works student reps, they pretty much help connect their law school's public interest law leaders with us at Equal Justice Works and they generally spread the word about public interest law on their campus. A lot of law students don't know about public service loan forgiveness. They don't know about any of the internships or fellowships that we have. We want those students to be aware that public interest law is a viable career option and our student reps are so, so crucial to helping us do that.

We also host our annual Public Interest Law Student Awards every year. We definitely like to celebrate the pro bono work and the extracurricular activities that students are doing to help their communities.

We also have our [Conference and Career Fair](#) every October. Our Conference and Career Fair is huge and it's where I got when I was just a 1L, actually I was going into my 2L year, that's where I actually got my first public interest law internship. The Conference and Career Fair is an awesome way to connect with employers. Let's say for instance you're in law school in Texas, but you want to work in New York. This is an opportunity to put yourself in front of employers from New York, so lots of employers from New York all at once. The Conference and Career Fair is awesome. That's in October of every single year.

If you want to stay up to date on all of this, obviously, you should sign up for our mailing list. It's on [equaljusticeworks.org](http://equaljusticeworks.org). We have a student website full of resources and webinars. There are lots of different ways to stay connected with us.

Alison Monahan: All right, so let's just recap that because unfortunately we are running out of time. If people want to connect with you, they can go to [equaljusticeworks.org](http://equaljusticeworks.org). What else? Can they find you on social media? How can they stay in touch?

Ashley Matthews: Yeah. You can follow us on social media @ejw\_students and we post everything there. If you follow us on Twitter and check out [our Twitter timeline](#), that's a

great way to stay up to date on everything that's going on. You can also email us at [students@equaljusticeworks.org](mailto:students@equaljusticeworks.org).

Alison Monahan: Fantastic, Ashley. Thank you so much for joining us. This has been extremely informative.

Ashley Matthews: Yeah. Thanks so much for having me, Alison. I always love getting out to talk about what we do.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely our pleasure. I know you guys are a great organization. The website is amazing. If you have questions on student debt, want to get involved on any type of different issues, there's a whole section. It's fantastic. I highly recommend visiting the website and getting involved with the community because I think they are doing a great job.

Unfortunately, we are out of time. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review and rating [on iTunes](#) or your favorite app because we would really appreciate it. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. Typically, our new episodes are out on Monday. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to me at [Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com](mailto:Alison@lawschooltoolbox.com) or you can always contact us via our [website contact form at lawschooltoolbox.com](#). Thanks for listening and we'll talk soon.

#### Resources:

- [Podcast Episode 38: Can You Really Afford Law School?](#)
- [Equal Justice Works Fellowships](#)
- [Equal Justice Works Rural Summer Legal Corps Program](#)
- [Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps JD](#)
- [Podcast Episode 92: Top 1L Questions: The Money Edition](#)
- [Podcast Episode 96: How to Rapidly Pay Off Law School Debt \(with Guest Financial Panther\)](#)
- [Equal Justice Works Free Student Debt Webinars](#)
- [Cowley, Stacy. "Student Loan Forgiveness Program Approval Letters May Be Invalid, Education Dept. Says." N.Y. Times, Mar. 30, 2017.](#)
- [John R. Justice Student Loan Repayment Program](#)
- [Law School LRAPs](#)
- [How to Get to Know Your Professors in Law School](#)
- [Equal Justice Works 2017 Conference and Career Fair](#)
- [Equal Justice Works on Twitter](#)