



Equal Justice Works Summer Corps Rewards Law Students Doing Public Interest Summers

[by Erica Winter]

In a way, becoming part of the Equal Justice Works Summer Corps is pretty easy.

The AmeriCorps-sponsored program is run by the group Equal Justice Works, Washington, DC, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting public interest legal work and careers. The Summer Corps is a group of law students doing summer public interest internships - for which they receive a \$1,000 voucher for educational expenses at the end of their summer stints.

Law students apply online over a two-week period in the spring. The student must secure an internship in advance for the summer at a nonprofit that provides legal services to low-income people - but the internship can be paid or unpaid. There are no academic requirements for program participation. If the nonprofit qualifies, and the law student is a United States citizen attending an Equal Justice Works member school - then the student has met all the guidelines, and has a good chance of getting in.

Then the easy part of joining the corps ends for the student when the hard work of spending a summer interning with public interest organizations begins. And, on the other side, Equal Justice Works is also continuing to do its "hard part" - working to increase the profile and practicality of public interest legal work through programs for law students, law schools, and lawyers.

This year 240 law students (out of about 500 applicants) from 111 different law schools will participate in Summer Corps. The program has been running since 1998. For law students, the program's goal is to "support students in their public interest endeavors," says Megan Blamble, Program Manager

for AmeriCorps programs at Equal Justice Works. And with the work the students do, Equal Justice Works hopes "to increase legal services to underserved communities," says Blamble.

Equal Justice Works seeks to "make it more feasible" for law students to work for little or no pay over the summer by helping with some law school expenses. The \$1,000 voucher comes from AmeriCorps after the student has completed at least 300 hours of public interest work at the approved nonprofit. The voucher amount can be put towards current educational expenses, such as loan repayment or payment for the upcoming semester's credits.

It's fine that the Summer Corps voucher will not arrive until the summer's work is done, says current participant Amanda Dohrman. Equal Justice Works is "invested in me," she says, and wants to make sure she finishes her work. The \$1,000 will help with her law school expenses in the fall, says Dohrman, who is working for Legal Aid of Minneapolis and its Senior Law Project for ten weeks this summer.

As helpful as the Summer Corps voucher will be, Dohrman says, it was still "critical for me to find funding" to cover living expenses while doing unpaid work at Legal Aid. Dohrman is working a part-time job in addition to her 30-hour weeks at Legal Aid. To supplement that, she was able to secure a separate grant through the Equal Justice Works Foundation, as well as a Class of 1998 Grant from her law school - the University of Iowa College of Law, Iowa City. It was "nice that the University

of Iowa had funding opportunities in addition to Equal Justice Works," says Dohrman.

Equal Justice Works was started in 1986 by law students who wanted a way to advocate for public interest law on law school campuses. Now, the organization, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year, runs three core programs, and offers services to member law schools, all with an eye towards expanding legal services to low income people by enabling lawyers and law students to pursue careers in the field.

In addition to Summer Corps, Equal Justice Works runs the Pro Bono Legal Corps, also funded by AmeriCorps, and maintains its flagship program - the Equal Justice Works Fellowships. The Fellowships match new attorneys with nonprofit groups and allow the attorney to serve low-income people's "unmet legal needs" for two years, says Dottie Li, Director of Communications for Equal Justice Works. Recent law school graduates propose their own plans for public interest service and then apply for the fellowships.

The Pro Bono Legal Corps, as opposed to the other two programs' focus on direct legal services, is instead a "capacity building program," says Blamble. The 22 participants work at 11 different host sites to create pro bono legal programs, which eventually encourage law students to volunteer with them.

Equal Justice Works also runs programs at its member schools, law schools that pay dues allowing their students to apply for the Summer Corps. There are currently 176 Equal Justice Works member law schools.



Member schools can participate in an annual public interest career fair and conference, says Blamble. Schools also receive technical assistance from Equal Justice Works in any efforts to improve public interest career possibilities for students. This could include trainings for law school staff on how to best fundraise for public interest fellowships, says Blamble, or a layout of how to set up a loan repayment assistance program for students going into nonprofit legal work upon graduation.