Legal Aid for the Poor and Lawyers

Today, many lawyers work in offices that offer legal services to persons who cannot afford to pay for them. Some legal aid offices are supported by funds from private groups. More lawyers work in local legal assistance offices that are funded by the government. In the U.S., most such offices are affiliates of the Legal Services Corporation. Many were formerly a part of the legal services arm of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Fresh law graduates are often employed as staff attorneys in these offices. Law students sometimes assist those staff attorneys.

The lawyers in legal service offices carry large caseloads. They need to be efficient, tolerant, and persistent. They interview clients unfamiliar with the law or legal remedies. Follow-up is difficult. A lawyer working in a Brooklyn, New York office says, “We prepare the necessary papers. We hope that clients make it to the various places where they are sent to file them. The system isn’t perfect. But often we do stop evictions. We do help some families in desperate situations.”

Most of the daily work involves problems with landlords or consumer complaints. Some legal service offices handle divorces and family law problems while others do not. Criminal cases are referred to public defenders. Some legal service lawyers work mostly on cases that involve reform. They seek court rulings or legislative changes that are major or will affect many people over a long period. These lawyers believe that this kind of work is more helpful to more people than dealing only with individual legal problems.

Pre-paid legal services plans

Each year, more lawyers are employed in offering low-cost legal services to middle income persons through pre-paid plans. There are differences, but these plans are somewhat similar to medical insurance plans. For an annual premium, members of labor unions and other groups who join the plans are entitled to certain kinds of legal advice and services each year. Under “closed” plans, members must consult particular lawyers. Under “open” plans, they may go to lawyers of their choice.

Public interest law

Some lawyers decide to use their legal training to do specialized work in bettering social conditions. In Washington, D.C., and other cities, certain lawyers have banded together to form public-interest firms of different kinds. Legal groups concerned with the environment have secured injunctions stopping some activities. In these suits, the courts were asked to prohibit defendants from doing such things as building power plants or pipelines, or cutting trees. For many years, legal relief has been on the agenda of civil rights organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These groups employ a few staff attorneys and engage many more lawyers as consultants to handle particular cases.

Some lawyers and law firms contribute legal services in the public interest on a volunteer basis. Individual lawyers may contribute the legal work needed for a certain public interest project. Some law firms do legal work for charitable organizations at no charge. This is sometimes called pro bono work. (The term comes from the Latin phrase pro bono publico, meaning “for the public good.”) Lawyers with modest practices cannot afford to do much of this work. All that lawyers have to sell is their time. It must be planned carefully. A lawyer needs to have a certain number of “billable” hours per day to maintain an office. Self-discipline and time-management skills are especially important to lawyers.

Government agencies

At the present time, about 15 percent of all lawyers work for the government in some way. The number is growing. Almost every agency has a general counsel, chief counsel, or solicitor who is assisted by dozens of staff lawyers. In the U.S., most positions for lawyers are exempted from taking civil service competitive examinations. Each agency recruits and hires its own lawyers. How do lawyers in government agencies spend their time? A lawyer in the Chief Counsel's office of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service might be found writing regulations to implement a new income tax law passed by Congress. In an office down the hall, another lawyer might be reviewing a tax

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regulations to implement a new income tax law passed by Congress. In an office down the hall, another lawyer might be reviewing a tax ruling. (Does the Dunnville Conservation Corps qualify as a tax-exempt organization?) Another lawyer may be writing a recommendation for a lawyer in the U.S. Department of Justice Tax Division, who will try a tax refund case in the federal court in St. Louis, Missouri. Other lawyers will be arguing before the U.S. Tax Court.

About half of the lawyers in U.S. agencies work in Washington, D.C. The rest are based in regional offices across the country.

Government lawyers spend much time in meetings and in conversation with other officials. They also listen to lawyers who represent the citizens affected by the laws. Generally, the work hours of the government lawyer are more regular than those of the lawyer in private practice.

**Lawyers and lawmaking**

There is no requirement that those who propose new laws, or vote on them, must be lawyers. A legislator, at any level of government, may be a druggist, a farmer, or a teacher. But the fact is that large numbers of legislators are lawyers. They seem to be drawn to public life, possibly because their work so often involves government decisions. (Two-thirds of the U.S. Presidents have been lawyers.)

Serving as a member of Congress or of the Canadian Parliament, or as a state or provincial legislator, is a part-time job for some lawyers, a full-time job for others. The work is interesting and demanding. It requires long and irregular hours and a superior ability to relate to people of all kinds. Tolerance, listening skill, and a good sense of humor are useful to the legislator. Working closely with legislators are lawyers (and non-lawyers) who are lobbyists. They represent groups and businesses that have special interest in certain laws. For example, the lobbyists concerned with firearms furnish lawmakers with information, pro and con (from different groups), related to proposed gun-control laws.

**Lobbyists have to be good communicators.**

In capitals everywhere, other lawyers assist law makers more directly. Staff lawyers arrange hearings and gather information for legislative committees. Lawyers in legislative reference offices draft newly proposed laws for lawmakers. Suppose an Illinois senator wanted to make a change in the juvenile court law of that state? These lawyers would be asked to help by rewriting the old law. They would prepare a "bill" for introduction in the Senate. In this document, the statute would be typed with the changes inserted and underlined. Such lawyers are skilled writers. Modern laws are complicated. Changes have to be written so as to cover all possible situations.

Many legislators have administrative aides who are lawyers. Aides have dozens of duties. They review laws on which the legislator must vote each session. They are in contact, every week, with voters who call with complaints or requests. Not all of the legislator's helpers are lawyers. However, legal training is helpful in securing some of these jobs, even if it is not required.