

## **Standing Out in the Crowd**

*What You Can Do in Law School to Make Yourself a Stronger Candidate For a Child Advocacy Job*

### **Volunteering**

Volunteering shows a commitment to public interest. Whether you are engaged in legal or non-legal volunteer work, you are demonstrating to a potential employer an interest in making things better for children. There are a host of volunteer opportunities out there. Your university or law school probably has a Community Service Office where you can get more information about volunteering.

#### **□ Non-legal Volunteer Opportunities**

When considering the sort of volunteer work to choose, realize that working with kids on any level is important. Kids need as much support as they can get, and most of that is non-legal. Also, working one on one with a kid will provide you with a great experience to really learn from children. For non-legal volunteer activities, you just need to look at your community.

- *Volunteering at Schools and Hospitals*

Schools and hospitals are a great place to start. Many schools have mentoring, tutoring and after-school programs where an extra hand is always appreciated. Hospitals use volunteers for a range of activities from cheering up patients to assisting nurses with miscellaneous responsibilities.

- *Volunteering at Other “Child-Friendly” Places*

There are many places in the community you might find a chance to work with children. You may look into volunteering at libraries or reading programs, coaching sports teams, working at summer camps and even museums usually have children’s programs.

- *Being a Pen Pal*

The organization Southwest Women Working Together (SWWT) in Chicago has a very unique volunteer opportunity: being a pen pal! SWWT has program where you can become a pen pal to kids living in it’s battered women’s shelters. If you look hard enough, you will find many interesting programs like this out there. If you are interested in getting involved in this one, visit their website: [www.swwt.org](http://www.swwt.org)

- *Volunteering at Group Homes*

Many of the issues that you will encounter working at group homes will be similar to those you would encounter working as a children’s attorney. Children can be placed in groups homes for a number of reasons, from developmental and mental health issues to delinquency and dependency issues. Working with these kids will give you additional insight into the sorts of issues you would be handling as a child advocate.

- *Be a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)*

While you would not be working in a legal capacity, you would be dealing with the court system as Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). After training, CASAs become the voice of the child in court. This is especially important for the kids that you will be working with, who will often feel as if their voices are never heard. CASA volunteers work with many of the same issues that child advocates work on, but in a non-legal context. You will gain familiarity with the issues you may encounter as a child advocate and you will have different perspective of the court process, possibly as seen through the child's eyes. To find more information or to contact your local CASA organization, go to [www.nationalcasa.org](http://www.nationalcasa.org).

- *Volunteer at a Day Care*

Another place to look is into your community's day care organizations. Some of them are geared toward low income families and could use the extra assistance. This would give you an opportunity to work with very young children and their families and to see some of the struggles that low income families face.

- *Get Involved in Your Community*

Being involved in your community will help you in a plethora of ways. You will make great contacts, you will encounter issues related to your field on a more multidisciplinary level and you will be demonstrating a commitment to the community. There are many ways to get involved in the community.

- ✓ Join a task force or a community organization of relevance to kids.
- ✓ Organize a panel discussion of different relevant organizations at your law school, introducing your classmates to some of the issues that arise in child welfare.

## □ **Legal Volunteer Activities**

- *Legal Aid Societies*

Contact your local legal aid office to find out what sorts of volunteer opportunities they may have. Since legal aid provides low cost/pro bono services to people who cannot otherwise afford an attorney, they rely heavily on grants, donations and volunteer services. The Legal Aid Society of New York for instance, has internship opportunities for law students and pro bono opportunities for lawyers who would like to help. ([www.legal-aid.org](http://www.legal-aid.org))

- *Family Law Firms*

You could also volunteer your services to attorneys who are already in the field, working as family and juvenile court lawyers. This will give you a chance to get hands on experience under the guidance of an experienced attorney, giving you a chance to learn some of the stuff they don't teach you in law school.

- *Law Firms*

If you are already at a law firm, you should find out what sorts of child advocacy opportunities they have. Many big law firms require that their associates do a certain number of hours of pro

bono work per year. These attorneys could always use some assistance, since most of them are trying to complete pro bono work while working full time for the firm.

- *Get Clinical Experience*

Gaining Clinical experience in public interest law is perhaps one of the most important steps you can take. You will get knowledge of what the field is really like and an idea of what else you may want to do to prepare for it.

- *Child/Family Law Clinics*

If you can work with a family law clinic, this may be your best bet. Family law deals often with child welfare issues, including custody, dependency, abuse and neglect.

- *Civil Clinics*

Often Civil Clinics offer opportunities to work on child welfare issues. For instance you may help a family with children receive public benefits, housing and other programs that could potentially prevent the breakdown of the family that often leads families into the child welfare system.

- *Domestic Violence Clinics*

Domestic violence clinics usually go hand in hand with family law clinics, only you will be dealing with the adults in abuse situations. The work that you do for a domestic violence clinic will be very similar to the work you could be doing in child welfare since many of the issues that affect domestic violence also affect the welfare of the child.

- *Criminal/Juvenile Delinquency Clinics*

Dealing with minors in the criminal/delinquency system will give you some real hands-on experience in child advocacy. These kids always need the help, and understanding them and where they are coming from can teach you the real basics of child advocacy that you just cannot learn in a classroom.

## □ **Independent Research Projects**

Doing an independent research project is another great way to stand out to potential employers, particularly if your independent study is centered on children's legal issues. Not only will such a project show your research and writing skills, it will also show that you are a self-starter whose organized and independent. Public interest employers want employees like that.

Figuring out what to do a research project on can be a little tricky. It requires paying attention to the field and asking many questions. This is the best way to find gaps in information, places where the research could be helpful. To be successful at such an independent research project, you will really need to get involved in the field by making as many contacts and gaining as much experience as possible.

### □ **Finding and Working With a Mentor**

One of the most important things that you can do for yourself is to find a mentor in your field. If accessed properly, mentors are a wealth of knowledge, experience and contacts. Your mentor can teach you the ins and outs of the professional world you are about to enter. Your mentor can advise you on what to do and what NOT to do as a law student, because s/he has been down the path before. Also, your mentor probably has good connections to the local child welfare world, and can let you know of opportunities before they have even been posted. Your mentor could be a professor, lawyer or even a judge. Many alumni and professional associations have mentoring programs. If this does not work, just keep your eyes open. Anybody can be a mentor, and most people are more than happy to do it.

### □ **Making Contacts and Networking**

Networking is a great skill for anyone to have in any field. Learning early how to network well is key. What most people do not realize is that networking with your peers is often just as important as making contacts in your field. While getting to know judges, lawyers and professors in your field will get you far, getting to know other law students has just as many advantages. For instance, because of their interests, your peers will know more about opportunities available to students like yourself.

### □ **Get Your Work Published**

Getting published is an excellent way to get recognized in the applicant pool. While scholarly publication is best, not every student can write for a legal journal. If you do not make a legal journal or you simply do not have the time to commit to a legal journal, look for other opportunities to get published. Follow the issues in child welfare and find something to write about. Submit your piece to newspapers and magazines. Most periodicals are looking for a fresh perspective and you could be the one to provide that for them.

### □ **Attend Trainings and Lectures**

Attending trainings and lectures demonstrates a genuine interest in the field. Further it will help you to gain familiarity with the issues most pertinent to your field today, which is helpful especially if you plan to pursue an independent research project. Finally, it's a great opportunity to network with other students and potential mentors. Contact your local bar association, relevant training and technical assistance organizations or the local courts for opportunities to sit in on lectures or CASA and GAL trainings.

### □ **Get Summer Internships and Part Time Employment**

It goes without saying that the best way to stand out to potential employer is with solid experience. If you can get a job in the field, doing anything for guardians ad litem, family law attorneys or for legal aid, definitely seize the opportunity. If you cannot work and go to school at the same time, (many law schools discourage that for their full time students), then look for a

summer internship. The problem with summer internships is that often, there are so many interns and so few internships that many employers do not pay. If you need the money, research grants and find out if your school can offer any assistance. Many schools will offer living stipends. To get this sort of funding and the competitive internships, you need to make contacts early. Start looking at potential summer internships early in the year. This will show potential employers a real desire and commitment to getting one of their positions. If you cannot afford to work for free for an entire summer, offer at least part of your summer.