



LAW Public Interest and  
Public Service Law Center

ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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## **Annual Report 2025**

This is my sixteenth and final Annual Report as the Lerner Family Associate Dean for Public Interest & Public Service Law at The George Washington University Law School. It has been a great honor and an unimaginable pleasure to serve the law students at GW and to help them find their ways to careers serving the public.

But all good things must come to an end, and so I am stepping aside from this position as soon as the search for my successor can be completed. I will continue to teach my first year courses and probably end up doing some other projects for the school. But I will have more time to devote to using the courts to try to save our democracy and to defend those who are being oppressed by the Government and who need the assistance of a lawyer but cannot afford or find one.

GW had a strong commitment to public service when I arrived in July 2009, and I hope that we have strengthened it. Objective measures are hard to come by, but one number is meaningful to me. Of the incoming class, well over 50% checked “Public Interest” on their applications, which I think suggests that interested law students see GW as among the top ranks for public interest students.

The rest of this report will discuss where we are in specific areas, with some mentions of where we were and where we would like to be. Before turning to that, I want to thank Dean Dayna Bowen Matthew who, in the five years since she arrived in the middle of the pandemic, has not simply been a stalwart supporter of the public interest program, but has pushed me to do more than I envisioned was possible. And she is by no means done. I also want to thank David Johnson, who worked with me for twelve years running the pro bono and pre-orientation parts of the program, while also handling the school’s moot court events, and our program manager, Anapaula Pérez-Gaitan, who in less than three years has provided the deep connection with our students that is essential to our

mission. I could not have achieved one-tenth of what is in this report without them. She is also the architect of the [website](#) for the entire public interest program where much useful information is posted. All the while she has finished her second year in the part-time GW law program.

### **The Advisory Council**

One of Dean Matthew's innovations was the creation of a Public Interest Advisory Council (PIAC) comprised of fifteen, and now almost twenty-five, alumni with strong public interest experiences and willingness to advance the program with their time and money. Beyond advice that that provide to the Dean and me, they serve as valuable mentors to our public interest students. Council dues have allowed us to support some activities for the first time, including providing travel expenses for graduating students who need to visit their prospective employers; supplementing summer grants for students who have extraordinary travel costs; and supporting students for public interest conferences. Finally, members of the Council, working with Professor Joan Meier who is a faculty advisor to the Council, have created a [course](#) in public interest advocacy that they will teach for the first time this fall.

### **Program Activities**

In mid-August, as we had done for fourteen years, before the regular law school orientation begins, we convened a three-day Public Interest Orientation in which 100+ incoming students have an opportunity to join like-minded 1Ls, supported by upper-class students who have experienced the orientation before, to visit the local courts and a wide variety of non-profit and government agencies. Last year, this program, which is the one of its kind among American law schools, included a visit to the local trial court to see it in operation; a meeting with the counsel to DC Mayor Muriel Bowser to learn about the "colonial" status of the District; a day at the Office of the US Attorney for the District; a meeting with judges from the Office of Administrative Hearings; a visit to the DC Jail; and community service at Bread for the City.

Two years ago, we recognized that, even after orientation, 1Ls did not have a good sense of what public interest law was all about. In response to this concern, we created “Public Interest Friday,” which is held annually in September. It is a half-day event featuring presentations from the [Financial Aid Office](#) on financing and affording a public interest education and career; the [Career Development Office](#) on public interest job hunting strategies, timeline, and career fairs; the [Field Placement Office](#) on public interest externship options; the [Jacob Burns Community Legal Clinics](#) on hands-on public interest and pro bono legal services; a panel of upper-level students; and a panel of diverse practitioners. The event is wrapped up in a reception allowing students to talk with the various presenters and panelists, and also includes an opportunity to meet alumni on the advisory council.

We also host regular panel events with practitioners from various fields and settings. For the last two years, we sponsored a program about pro bono opportunities at law firms. The panel consisted of three alumni who work at law firms (or a corporation) that encourage their lawyers to do pro bono work, joined by a civil rights lawyer whose organization is a consumer of pro bono services, all of whom are members of our Council. Their messages were that firms are anxious to have associates who want to do pro bono and doing pro bono is a great way to gain experience and have more responsibility. Like Public Interest Friday, this will be a regular part of our schedule going forward.

Other such panel events held this year included a panel of prosecutors from all over the country, a panel of various nonprofit attorneys on the importance of “nonprofit lawyering,” a panel of plaintiffs’ lawyers, a panel of public defenders from various jurisdictions, a panel on careers in the FBI, a panel of immigration attorneys (both on the government and the nonprofit side), and more. While panel events and info sessions such as these will occur every year, the subject of those panels will vary and be based on current student interests.

For the past fifteen years, I have chosen five incoming students who receive the designation of Public Interest Scholar, which mainly means that I am their faculty mentor and provide them additional guidance regarding their public interest careers, plus a Supreme Court trip to hear oral arguments without having to stand in line. The five students also receive \$5000 for a summer public interest job after their first year. Students not selected for this program can apply for summer grants through the regular [summer funding application process](#).

### **Related Programs**

For those new to GW Law (and for many who have been here for some time), there is often uncertainty about the relation among the Pro Bono Program, the Clinics, and the Field Placement Program. A short summary explaining how these three parts of the experiential learning fit together, which also contains links that provide further information about each program, is [here](#).

We also work with other DC-area law schools each year to put on “DC Alternative Spring Break.” Alternative Spring Break is a program that provides law students with opportunities to engage in hands-on, law-related volunteer work with area organizations during their spring break. Participating in this program is a great way for students to serve the community, gain legal experience, network, and build their pro bono practice. This year’s Alternative Spring Break was our most expansive yet, bringing together 128 law students from six different law schools for two weeks of hands-on pro bono work. In collaboration with nine community organizations, students tackled a variety of legal issues, from direct client services to policy research and advocacy. Whether assisting tenants facing eviction, supporting asylum seekers, or analyzing legislative policies, students played a critical role in addressing urgent legal needs in our community.

As an extension of this spring break program, as in prior years, for the second year in a row, we sent a group of students interested in immigration issues to Laredo, Texas on the Mexican border. They toured two detention centers

and met with 30+ detained individuals; had dinner with a former Congressional candidate; took a day trip to Eagle Pass to speak with a grassroots community activist/advocate; visited the Texas-Mexico Border in both Eagle Pass and Laredo; sat in on Laredo Immigration Court; and ate authentic Mexican food.



### **Richey Fellows**

This was the second year for the [Richey Fellows](#) program, under which we will bring mid-career lawyers who are working for government agencies or non-profit organizations to share their experiences and meet one-on-one with students over three days. The program is funded by the former law clerks and friends of the Hon. Charles R. Richey of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Richey Fellows are selected from a wide variety of practice areas, including criminal and civil direct legal services, law reform litigation, and public and non-profit regulatory and policy practice. The 2024-2025 academic year welcomed four Richey Fellows: Julia Burke, Assistant Federal Defender for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania; Auden Perino, Senior Counsel for LGBTQI+ Equality at the National Women's Law Center; Ari Savitzky, Senior Staff Attorney for the ACLU Voting Rights Project; and Chelsea Sharon, Attorney with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Appellate Litigation Services Program.





Visiting fellow, Chelsea Sharon (right), with Clinical Professor and Director of the Health Rights Law Clinic, Drake Hagner (left).

The four lawyers who are invited for this coming year are an attorney who leads the National Parole Transformation Project with the Roderick & Solange MacArthur Justice Center; an administrative judge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; an attorney with the Democracy Forward Foundation working on civil and constitutional rights; and Director of the Fred Hiatt Program to Free Political Prisoners with Freedom House. Their names and bios will be posted on the Richey Fellows portion of the website before the start of the Fall 2025 semester.

The other part of the Richey program is the presentation of an award and a conversation with a lawyer who has had a distinguished career working to assure that the civil rights and civil liberties of all of us are protected. This past October the award was given to Retired D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge David Tatel. Before ascending the bench, Judge Tatel was a fierce defender of civil rights in the government, in a non-profit organization, and in private practice. He was interviewed by Professor Jonathan Cederbaum who clerked for Judge Tatel. The focus of the discussion was Judge Tatel's book *Vision*, which has a dual significance. In addition to his vision of the law and a

just society, Judge Tatel gradually lost his eyesight beginning in college and much of the book is devoted to how he managed his loss of vision, including how his life was transformed recently when he acquired his dog, Vixen.

### **Jobs & Job Funding**

Because of our location in Washington, many students who come to GW do so because of their interest in working in the Government or for non-profits who interact with various parts of the Government on a regular basis. That is why over 23% of the 2024 graduating class (the last one for which we have data) had federal, state, or local government, or non-profit jobs, not including judicial clerkships (11%). Moreover, our students are in a better position than many, not only because being in Washington makes it easier to learn about openings and move quickly, but also because almost five hundred of our students participate annually in externships through the [Field Placement Program](#), which is among the largest of its kind at any law school. Participants in that program gain real world experience, for academic credit, in government and non-profit jobs. What is even more significant is that doing a good job at a Field Placement can be an excellent way to land a permanent position there, or at some other place elsewhere a satisfied supervisor is happy to recommend a student. Starting in mid-March 2020, all our placements were remote, and like most legal jobs today, they are now mainly remote, but partially in an office. This means that our students are able to see what their work environments are actually like and meet in person with real lawyers doing work that interests them.

GW's long term record of placing both its graduates and its summer interns with the federal government suffered a major jolt in January 2025 when the new administration abruptly rescinded hundreds of job offers that had been accepted both for graduates and for the summer programs, including the coveted honors programs at many agencies. Some of those offers were eventually restored, and it appears that federal agency recruiting is coming back, but where that will lead is not yet known.



For many years, there has been public criticism of Congress and the federal agencies for not paying their interns. That changed three years ago for at least some federal agencies and now some non-profits. After a year of studying the change, the Field Placement program now allows students to be paid (and receive academic credit) if they work for a government agency and for most non-profits. The law school does not allow students to earn academic credit while working in the for-profit sector because the school wishes to encourage public sector work and because there are so many positions available in Washington with non-profit and government offices.

There are three other parts to the jobs function in which we partner with the [Career Development Office](#). These include (a) informing students about public interest or public service jobs, and why they are worth pursuing; (b) making specific information about specific jobs readily available; and (c) assisting in financing those opportunities and advising students about federal laws that make accepting such positions after graduation much more financially feasible.

Much of the basic information dissemination work used to be done by the Career Development Office, but increasingly our program manager Anapaula is taking on this function. I once again addressed four of the six Inns of Court in a special session on alternative jobs and why students should explore them. We have also arranged to have speakers who will broaden student horizons on the world of public interest law and assist students seeking post-graduate public interest fellowships, as well as the Richey mid-career public interest fellows discussed above.

On the financing side, the federal loan repayment and loan forgiveness programs are a major help to students who wish to take lower paying jobs, with governments, non-profits, or even law firms that serve middle income clients. The basics are described [here](#). But there are storm clouds on the horizon for students who must borrow money to attend law school. Congress just enacted a

law that will limit the amount a professional school student can borrow annually to \$50,000, which is less than half the total cost of attending GW law school for a year, including room, board etc. It will impact public interest students in particular because they rely on the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program to wipeout unpaid portions of federal loans after 10 years in public service. But that law applies only to federal loans, and so if students have to borrow from commercial lenders, not only will the rates be higher, but the loans cannot be forgiven. A significant challenge this year will be to find ways to soften the effects of this major change.

The Law School also has a modest [Loan Assistance Repayment Program](#), which is designed to help students who take low paying law-related positions in government service or at public interest organizations with the repayment of their law school debts. In 2019, we undertook a full review of the program and made significant changes, which have made it more transparent, provided objective criteria for granting assistance, and reduced the amount of discretion to assure that like graduates are treated the same. [Here](#) is how it operates. Augmenting this program, including by adding a forgiveness component, may be a way of lessening the adverse effects of the limit on federal loans.

Since I arrived at GW, my long-term goal has been to provide funding so that every student would be guaranteed a living wage (adjusted regularly for inflation) for a summer job in a non-profit organization or a government agency. We have a very modest program now that, together with the funding from the student-run Equal Justice Foundation, provides for stipends or tuition remissions for almost 100 students this year, far less than the demand. This year all of the students who were selected received \$5,000 or \$6,000 depending on whether they were rising 2Ls or 3Ls. (It was \$3,000 or \$4000 until Dean Matthew increased it three years ago.) There is also a program during the academic year for 3Ls that provides a substantial stipend for working in a public sector organization, but students cannot earn credit as they can in field placement. I continue to work with the Dean and the Development Office to bring in additional sponsors for

summer grants, and we have added almost fifteen in recent years. In addition, support from our Advisory Council enabled us to supplement these grants for students who had summer jobs in distant places or whose rent expenses were out of ordinary, generally because they had to keep their local place while living elsewhere.

### **Pro Bono**

With the negative impact of the coronavirus on [pro bono](#) work by our students almost finally dissipated, our students were able to engage in significant pro bono work. The graduating class of 2025 volunteered 74,890 pro bono hours submitted by 265 students, an average of almost 283 hours per student. Unlike a number of other schools, those hours include only those for which the student receives neither academic credit nor any form of pay. To put that average in perspective, New York State requires only 50 hours of pro bono work for bar admission, and it counts hours for which the student receives academic credit or is paid for work at non-profits. Another way to think about this year's accomplishment is to recognize that it is almost nine times the 6,380.5 hours recorded by 64 members of the class of 2011 when the pro bono program began in earnest, and an increase of 31% in the total number of hours from 2024.

This year we started two new pro bono programs in the criminal justice area. In the first, sixty-one students volunteered to work with twenty-two formerly incarcerated DC residents to prepare their applications for federal pardons. Each case is different, and the students work with the applicant to gather the required information and to present it in a way that best advocates for the applicant. The second project is part of a study being done by the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project (MAIP) seeking to determine the reasons behind wrongful convictions. MAIP has about 25,000 files, which include all of the requests made to it, whether it took on the representation or not. Each of the fifty-nine students who joined the project will read an entire file and respond to a series of questions, many of which require law training to answer. So far, the

students have coded and analyzed over 150 cases, producing the largest data set ever in the field of wrongful convictions. MAIP plans to use the outcome of the study to advocate for their clients in court as well as in the legislatures.

Finally, we believe that are we are close to a breakthrough in a project that has been on my wish list since I first visited the DC jail in 2010. Hundreds of young men (and some women) are arrested and detained each year with no opportunity to get their basic affairs in order and no one to help them with matters ranging from getting their last paycheck, to getting their belongings from where they were living, to stopping child support while they are incarcerated. Their criminal defense lawyers cannot help with civil matters and the incarcerated cannot do it on their own. Our solution is to have law students, under the supervision of an attorney, provide basic services. The hoped-for breakthrough is the idea of having the criminal lawyers inform their clients of our services so that our students do not have to enter the facilities to make the contact with the inmates. We are hoping to start a pilot program this fall.

As a way of thanking students who participate in the Pro Bono Program, GW Law celebrates any student who provides 50 hours or more of pro bono legal services while at the law school in our annual Pro Bono Recognition Ceremony. These students receive the Dean's Certificate of Pro Bono Service, as well as inclusion in the Honors & Awards section of the Commencement Program.



Dean Alan B. Morrison and Dean Dayna Bowen Matthew awarding student Carla Moss at the annual Pro Bono Recognition Ceremony.

In a city in which there are so many individuals in need of legal services, it should not be difficult to find ways for law students to bridge some of that gap. But it is not easy. Most existing organizations are not set up to take on volunteers for a variety of reasons, some understandable—no space and the student’s lack of a specific commitment to give a significant amount of time—and others less so (it means changing the way things have always been done). Then there is the concern, largely over-stated, that law students might be providing assistance in a way that could be construed as giving legal advice. As a result, while some of our students volunteer at existing organizations (mainly doing intake work), we have built our pro bono program on new ideas and new approaches, as the projects discussed below illustrate.

There are three other ingredients, at least two of which are essential for every successful pro bono project: a committed partner organization,

enthusiastic students, and well-thought-out logistics. The best ideas for projects will go nowhere unless there are willing partners and students who want to carry the ball and bring along others who are not ready for leadership roles. In some cases, such as our original domestic violence assistance project, the idea came from a student, and our role was to make it happen by opening doors and solving problems, which we did until some local court officials thought we were doing too much, even though there were never complaints about the quality of what our students did. In others, such as the probate court project, the idea came from outside the law school, and it succeeded because of stronger support from the Probate Division of the Superior Court, but was stopped when the court went virtual—though it was revived in spring of 2024 and will continue again in the 2025-26 academic year.

No matter what the source, the idea can bear fruit only if there are individuals who want to see that the project actually gets done and who can help solve any logistics problems. And on the logistics side, the surest way to kill a project is to have either students or the individuals they are hoping to serve sit around without the other essential components. This past year, the pandemic continued to create barriers for new and existing programs, especially those that were at the Superior Court.

Live pro bono training by legal services providers was reduced during the pandemic, and so two local law schools (American and Georgetown) joined forces with GW to create a shared virtual pro bono training. Indeed, it was the pandemic that gave us ideas for permanent improvements that make it much easier to provide those trainings, and we now also partner with UDC, Catholic, and Howard. Because trainers do not have to go to each campus, they can reach a much larger audience, and their sessions can easily be recorded and shared at multiple institutions. This academic year, the virtual trainings included:

- Capital Area Immigrants' Rights Coalition (CAIR)
- Neighborhood Legal Services Program



- The Veterans Consortium
- The Washington Lawyers' Committee: Workers' Rights Clinic
- The D.C. Superior Court Probate Self-Help Center

It is very hard to create, maintain, and grow pro bono projects because our partners change their priorities, and they find that they can handle the program on their own without our direct assistance. Nonetheless, we continue to send students for pro bono assignments to long term groups such as the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. In addition, several of our projects - the Bankruptcy Clinic, and the Probate and Landlord-Tenant Projects at the Superior Court - fell victim to Covid because they could no longer serve the public, and the project that helped individuals without lawyers in the Family Law Division of the Superior Court has now been incorporated into one of the Law School's clinics.

There is one idea that we hope to advance now that we have an alumni advisory council: encourage our alums in small and mid-size firms to do more pro bono work, by making students available to assist them. That would build on our current work in which we have connected GW law alums to non-profit organizations that need pro bono lawyers. Our successful efforts to persuade the Department of Labor to allow students to volunteer for pro bono work at for profit firms makes this possible, but the challenge remains to connect the student, the lawyer, and the pro bono project.

### **The Future**

We are in the process of launching a major fundraising effort for the program. The priorities are permanent endowment for the program manager position; multiplying the number of summer grants from the 100 we now give; and hiring an attorney to supervise law students in the pro bono projects that the program will create. Other ideas include endowments for post-graduate fellowships and funds to bring in lawyers leaving senior positions in the government or lawyers with extensive public interest careers to teach a class,

work on their pet projects, and interact with public interest students for a semester at a time.

On the academic side, for many years, students have been trying to start a public interest law journal, but the cost and many other barriers stood in the way. Several students came up with a different concept—the journal will be solely online, have most articles around 5,000 words with many fewer footnotes, and have rapid turnaround—that I supported and helped them flesh out. There was significant student interest, largely because of the subject matter, but the proposal is caught up with an overall review of the school’s journals and a concern that there are too many already. As of this date, its fate is undetermined.

### **Conclusion**

Under the leadership of Dean Matthew, the public interest program is poised to make major strides in expanding its activities and providing a true public interest community to which students, faculty, and staff are attracted. We are very excited that this will enable the program to go to a new level, and we are eager to make it happen. We have made considerable strides in the past sixteen years, but there is a long way to go in providing more opportunities for our students and in augmenting services to our community. We look forward to continuing to explore new ways to achieve our goals and to make George Washington *the* “public interest law school.”

Alan B. Morrison