

Some Key Steps for Students Considering Establishing Socially Conscious Law Practices

1. *Carefully Assess Whether Establishing a Solo Practice is Right for You.* Some questions that may help:
 - a. Do you want to be a legal aid attorney and you are considering a solo practice only because it’s a tough job market? Establishing a solo practice, whether through a program or on your own, is radically different than being a traditional public interest attorney, and it is hard, uncertain work. If what you really want is an institutional legal aid career, pursuing that may be a better path. However, starting a solo practice does not mean that you have to stop looking for legal aid positions! Many solos do contract work, either for other attorneys in private practice or for legal aid organizations, or volunteer with a legal aid agency.
 - b. Are you willing to be a business person? Running a business requires different skills than practicing law, and it is not for everyone. Networking, marketing and business development, accounting, and other office management issues will account for a significant portion of your time.
 - c. Will you be comfortable charging and collecting from clients? If not, are you willing to push yourself in this area? Many public interest lawyers chose that path in part because they don’t want to charge clients – they just want to help. A successful practice requires realistic pricing strategies and collection strategies.
 - d. How much money do you need to make? Do you have a level of financial flexibility? It is important to have a realistic understanding of your financial needs and goals, and a plan for ramping up to get there.
 - e. What are your other options? Do you have the option to take a more traditional job that might not be your ideal? Taking the example of working for a firm: is the tradeoff of doing work you might not be crazy about worth it for a steady paycheck and the resources that come with working for a firm? Can you return to a pre-law-school job in the short term?
2. *Understand the Local Landscape.* Find out whether incubators or other programs are available to help you get established. Investigate modest means programs, referral systems, organizations that provide services on a sliding scale, and legal aid programs to learn about how a practice might fit into the existing services. Join bar sections and other organizations dedicated to low bono lawyering.
3. *Reach Out.* Get to know other solo and small firm attorneys in your area. Join bar sections, both for solo/small firm lawyers and in your practice areas. Don’t approach people with a specific agenda - simply get to know people and let them get to know you. Those who have gone before are your most valuable resource in this venture. They can help you with everything from client referrals to finding furniture for your office to choosing your accountant. If you are especially impressed with or hit it off with someone, don’t hesitate to ask them to have a cup of coffee with you to discuss their practice, or if they might have some contract work to throw your way.
4. *Build Relevant Skills.* Volunteering with legal aid and modest means organizations in the areas you want to practice is one way to build skills, and may help you connect with referral sources and mentors. Taking business and law practice management classes will give you a head start on establishing a practice. If they are not available through your law school, your local bar association may offer classes. In addition, many incubators and similar programs have resources and online courses that are available to the public.

Suggested Resources

The following resources can help you and your entrepreneurial, public-interest minded law students better understand the options available to them and to better assess whether pursuing a solo or small practice that includes a focus on modest means clients is right for them.

ABA Legal Access Job Corps. This page provides useful information about innovations in the legal field to increase access to civil justice. The Legal Access Jobs Corps Resource Center provides an inventory of programs designed to assist lawyers who are dedicated to improving access to legal services, including incubators, fellowships and other programs.

Bar Association Law Practice Management Programs. Many bar associations have robust law practice management programming. The Florida Bar Association’s Law Office Management Section is an example of a program that provides many [helpful resources](#) for starting a law firm and their resources are available to the public. The Washington State Bar Association’s [Law Office Management Assistance Program website](#) provides tips, checklists and other resources to the public. Many bar resources are only available to members, so you should check what is available locally. Students who are considering starting their own firms should explore the checklists and other documents and ask themselves whether they are interested in the kind of activities that are involved in running a business (in addition to practicing law) and should honestly assess whether they have the skills to do so. Students might also consider attending bar or other CLE programs about opening and operating a law office and other related topics to learn more and help assess their interest.

Solo Networks and Resources. Students considering a solo practice should explore the local and national resources and networks for solo practitioners to better understand the market and culture. For example, Carolyn Elefant, a well-known solo and national speaker, provides helpful insight and resources on her blog www.myshingle.com. Local formal and informal solo networks are a good way for students to meet lawyers who have started their own practices. In Chicago, for example, www.simplysologroup is a welcoming group of talented, often newer attorneys who have established solo practices. Many state and local bar associations host solo and small practice sections which connect practitioners to learn and network together.

Entrepreneur Groups and Business/Tech Incubators. Entrepreneurial law students and lawyers can learn from and be energized by attending programs for and connecting with other entrepreneurs. These networks may also lead to potential clients. In Chicago, for example, [Entrepreneurs Unplugged](#) has offered programs on disruptive businesses (which many of these new law firms will aim to be). [1871](#) is the leading incubator for tech companies in Chicago, and offers programs that are open to the public and of interest to all entrepreneurs.

Incubators for Newer Lawyers Establishing Similar Practices. Connect with lawyers or alumni from these programs to learn about their practices and what it took to get there. Determine if you are eligible to participate in the program or whether you might participate in some of their programming and trainings. The Justice Entrepreneurs Project in Chicago is an example of one such program.

5 Tips for the Entrepreneurial Public Interest Student/Grad

1. *Be Brave* - You will take a lot of knocks striking out on your own. Be prepared to learn from them and improve, and stick with it.
2. *Find Your Niche* - There is a high demand for many affordable legal services, but it is easier to market yourself if you can establish expertise and focus in one field that is particularly underserved in your area.
3. *Diversify* - Contradicting the last point a little, make sure all your eggs aren't in one financial basket.
4. *Do Your Homework* - There is a lot to starting your own practice. Do everything you can to make yourself a subject matter expert and learn what you need to (and keep learning) about running a business.
5. *Build a Support Network* - This is hard work, and you can't do it alone. Establish a professional network of mentors (public interest attorneys and other solo practitioners are especially valuable and always willing to help), as well as a personal network to keep you afloat.

3 Tips for Counselors

1. *Do Your Homework* - Familiarize yourself with resources in your area (state and local bar associations, other law schools, potential funders, successful alumni, etc.)
2. *Know the Big Answers* – One potential motivator for young grads work in a non-profit setting is federal loan forgiveness. Know the details of the program, what qualifies, and if there are other financial supports available. Whether a solo practice your new law grad envisions may qualify for nonprofit status is an evolving issue, but important to explore.
3. *Build a Better System* - If you have the institutional resources and interest, explore the idea of starting an incubator and/or modest means referral program to successfully launch and support new grads engaged in low bono practice.