

CAREERS IN FAMILY LAW / JUVENILE LAW

I. Family Law/Juvenile Law Practice Overview

Family lawyers handle a wide range of matters – divorce; child custody, support, and visitation; prenuptial and postnuptial agreements; guardianships for the elderly, infirm, and mentally disabled who cannot care for themselves; domestic and foreign adoptions; termination of parental rights; the establishment of paternity; and estate planning.

Most family law attorneys practice in small firms or on their own and tend to be more entrepreneurial. Some large firms employ a family law attorney or two to handle high-stakes divorce cases for their clients, though typically hire seasoned attorneys in these roles. The Domestic Relations Division of the Cook County Circuit Court appoints private attorneys as Guardians ad Litem (GAL). The GAL acts as the child's representative who will advocate for what is in the best interest of the child.

Family and juvenile attorneys may work in the government arena, as well. Opportunities for attorneys exist with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office, the Cook County Public Guardian's Office, the Public Defender's Office and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

The Cook County State's Attorney's Office hires prosecutors in the Juvenile Justice Bureau. The Bureau contains two divisions: (1) Delinquency; (2) Child Protection. The Delinquency Division handles cases involving juveniles under the age of 17 who have been arrested for committing a crime. The Child Protection Division files civil actions against parents and guardians who abuse or neglect their children. There is also a Domestic Violence Division. These attorneys handle both felony and misdemeanor cases through vertical prosecution, a method that provides consistent service to the victim and continuity to the case as it travels through the system from beginning to end.

The Cook County Public Guardian's Office is comprised of three divisions: (1) the Juvenile Division; (2) the Adult Guardianship Division; and (3) the Domestic Relations Division. Attorneys in the Juvenile Division will represent minors in Juvenile Court acting both as a Guardian ad Litem and Attorney for the trial. In the Adult Guardianship Division, Public Guardians are appointed through the Probate Court to act as the guardian for disabled adults 18 years of age and older who have assets at least of \$25,000. The attorneys within the Domestic Relations Division represent children by court appointment in divorce and parentage cases heard at the Daley Center and at the Court at 32 West Randolph in Chicago. Their role as the child's legal representative is to advocate for the best interest of the child client regarding issues of custody, visitation, support, removal from the jurisdiction and risk of harm in orders of protection hearings.

The Public Defender's Office provides legal representation in the areas of criminal, misdemeanor, paternity, abuse and neglect for individuals who cannot afford legal representation.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services provides child welfare services in Illinois. Attorneys with DCFS represent the agency in all child welfare related matters, including juvenile delinquency, child protection, foster care, and adoption matters.

Attorneys also work in the public interest sector, as well. A list of not-for-profit agencies is outlined in Section IV.

Most family law attorneys divide their time between client counseling, court appearances, and legal work related to their current caseload, such as drafting pleadings and briefs, taking depositions, and handling phone calls related to the case. For attorneys specializing in family law, keeping in close touch with their clients is a top priority. Family lawyers report that the opportunity to work closely with their clients makes this area of practice extremely rewarding.

II. Skills Most Important to Family Lawyers

- ❖ Family law attorneys agree that the **ability to empathize** with the problems of others is critical to success in the field.
- ❖ Another important skill is the **ability to remain objective** about highly sensitive matters, even when the client is facing a life crisis.
- ❖ **Counseling and good listening skills** are essential – many clients are dealing with the most difficult and challenging issues they will ever face.
- ❖ Family law attorneys must be **patient**: clients may feel the need to talk to their attorney at all hours of the day, and at great lengths for support.
- ❖ Excellent **negotiation skills** are valuable, as many cases in family law settle.
- ❖ Because family lawyers are often in court, they should possess **good trial skills**, and have the **ability to think on his or her feet**.

III. Classes and Law School Experiences Recommended

Family law and related classes should be taken. These include juvenile law, estate planning and elder law classes. **Business law** classes are helpful as well, i.e., tax, employee benefits, corporations and partnerships, and accounting, as you will be working with the division of people's assets. A conflict of laws class can help prepare you to work on divorces in which the parties or properties are in different states and to work on interstate adoptions. **Trial advocacy, competing in mock trial and moot court** will help with feeling comfortable in the courtroom. Additionally, it is important to develop **strong writing skills**, therefore **legal drafting** classes will be helpful. Family law attorneys engage in an extremely high level of written communication with clients and there is a need for articulate and persuasive arguments in pleadings and briefs.

It is also helpful to gain as much practical experience as possible while in law school by **working as a law clerk, participating in an externship, or interning** for a family lawyer, public interest group or government agency. Attorneys often hire law students for the summer and during the school year to assist them with legal research and drafting.

Clerking also provides the opportunity to obtain a more realistic view of what life as a family law attorney entails. The **Clinical Externship Program** through JMLS is an excellent way to gain experience and earn credit at the same time. There are opportunities with the Cook County Public Defender's Office in the Juvenile Division, the Cook County Public Guardian's Office, the Cook County State's Attorney's Office in the Juvenile Justice/Child Protection Division, the Legal Aid Bureau and the Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago.

Whenever possible, **sit in on courtroom proceedings**. The Domestic Relations Division in Cook County is located on the 19th floor of the Daley Center. Juvenile proceedings are confidential and therefore not open to the public, so it will be necessary to accompany an attorney representing a party to the proceedings or you can arrange for a pass by contacting the office of the Presiding Judge at (312)433-6685.

Also, network with other students to learn about potential "hand-me-down" positions. Students leaving a clerking position may be assisting the firm in seeking a replacement. Please visit the CSO to discuss ways to find opportunities in the summer and/or throughout the school year.

Becoming a volunteer is an excellent way to learn more about the field, make contacts, and provide a valuable service to the community. It is also a great way for a 1L to gain experience. The Circuit Court of Cook County hires volunteers in the Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department. Please refer to www.cookcountycourt.org for more information or call the Mentoring Network at (312)433-6685.

Another opportunity to **volunteer** is through CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) in the Cook County Juvenile Court. The volunteers, or "Advocates", are appointed by a judge and assigned to one case at a time, serving as an independent voice for abused and neglected children. Go to www.casacookcounty.org for more information and how to volunteer.

Develop relationships within the community of family lawyers...NETWORK. Family law is a specialized field; family lawyers in a particular geographic area know each other well. Developing good relationships with the lawyers you clerk for and the lawyers you meet in **bar association activities** can be very helpful in obtaining a position upon graduation. The Illinois State Bar Association has a Family Law section that would be helpful in making important contacts. The website is www.illinoisbar.org for more information. The Chicago Bar Association also has YLS committee in Family Law for young lawyers. You can find more information on www.chicagobar.org.

John Marshall **alumni** are attorneys with whom students may contact to request **informational interviews**. Please see the CSO's Job Search Guide for more information on informational interviews and for assistance in locating alumni. Students can also perform a Martindale Hubbell or Lexis Nexis search for local family law firms and alums engaged in the practice of family law. In addition, the CSO has a **Mentor Program** whereby students can select a mentor practicing in a particular field. If you are interested

in a mentor for the upcoming school year, information is available on the Career Services website.

IV. Not-For-Profit

As mentioned above, family and/or juvenile attorneys work in the public interest sector. Below is a list of various agencies in Chicago for such opportunities.

- Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic
www.cgla.net
- Chicago Legal Clinic
www.clclaw.org
- Chicago Volunteer Legal Services
www.cvl.org
- CLAIM (Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers)
www.c-l-a-i-m.org
- Legal Aid Bureau of Metropolitan Family Services
www.metrofamily.org
- CARPLS
www.carpls.org
- Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago
www.lafchicago.org

V. Professors in Family Law

Professors are always a good resource for information. You may want to ask them about career paths to becoming a family law practitioner, potential places to seek employment, contacts they may know, or any other question pertaining to juvenile law and/or family law.

- Professor Susan L. Brody (Family Law)
- Professor Diane S. Kaplan (Juvenile Law)
- Professor Anthony S. Zito