

PUBLIC DEFENDER JOBS

INTERVIEW TIPS

Every interviewer will have a different style and format, but generally the interviews are designed to test the applicant on three things: ability as an oral advocate, commitment to indigent clients, and willingness to stand up for what one thinks is right. Prior to the interview, you should practice describing experiences that demonstrate these skills.

(1) Asking “Why”

Perhaps the most important trait the interviewer is looking for is your passion for and commitment to being a public defender. They almost always lead with the “why” question:

- Why do you want to be a public defender?
- Given society’s distaste for crime and criminals, why would you choose this as a career?
- Given the large number of applicants for this position, why should we choose you?
- How would you feel representing a guilty person?

Sometimes the interviewer pulls something from your resume to ask the same information:

- I see that you worked with battered women while in law school. How would you feel about representing clients who batter women?
- You interned with the Georgia State Attorney General’s Office. Why do you want to be a public defender and not a prosecutor?
- You attended a private college and now a prestigious law school. Why do you believe you can relate to our largely poor, often drug-addicted, client base?

Your answer might focus on constitutional rights:

- Everyone deserves a defense
- Even those who commit the most heinous offenses deserve the protections given all Americans
- I want to hold the government to its burden of proof

Or perhaps on your sense of duty and fairness:

- I enjoy being the underdog
- I believe that individuals have a duty to stand up to overreaching government
- I think the system is unfair to the poor and the diverse and I want to fight to make it fairer

It may be best to focus on your personal experiences:

- Although I was fortunate to be raised in a privileged background, my work with the

homeless and other economically disadvantaged during college made me aware of the difficulties they face. I want to fight for them on the front lines of the criminal justice system.

- Race is still an issue in this country. I came to law school to fight to change the way the criminal justice system treats whites versus other racial groups.
- My work in trial advocacy showed me that my true abilities lie in trial work and criminal defense is the one area of litigation that is meaningful to me.

2. Hypotheticals

Interviewers sometimes present applicants with hypothetical situations designed to test the applicant's instincts, judgment, and ability to think quickly. Often these situations will test an applicant's willingness to work for the guilty client. Here is an example:

You represent John Doe charged with beating his wife. Doe admits to you that he did in fact beat his wife but stresses that an investigation into his wife's personal background will reveal facts about her--drug addiction, neglect of her children, and petty theft--that will devastate her credibility and result in Doe's acquittal. He also tells you in an offhand remark that he would beat her again if he had the chance. The interviewer then asks you how you would proceed.

Other hypotheticals may include situations asking you whether and how you would stand up to a judge who was exhibiting bias against your client; your willingness to convince a client with a bad case to take a plea; and your willingness to investigate a client's alibi even if you personally had doubts about its veracity.

In answering these questions, remember to acknowledge your ethical obligations. The questions are not often intended to test your knowledge of ethics rules, but the interviewers like to be certain they do not hire unethical attorneys who would embarrass them or tarnish the reputation of the office.

3. Role Playing

In addition to hypotheticals, interviews may include role-playing exercises and mock court proceedings. Applicants will be presented with a set of facts and then asked to interview the client, prepare a bail application or a summation.

These exercises may appear to be a test of the candidate's knowledge of criminal law or procedure. However, it is more likely that the interviewer is trying to assess your ability to think quickly, speak clearly, and relate to indigent clients. In situations where you are unsure of the relevant law underlying a particular exercise, it is okay to say so: "I'm not sure what the criteria is for setting bail in Florida, so I am going to do my bail application based on the federal standard." But even if you are unsure of the law, you should enthusiastically participate in the exercise, gaining points for flexibility and quick thinking.

Some tips on handling the role playing:

- Be sure to shake your client's hand
- Be respectful and polite
- Clearly explain who you are and what your role is
- Frequently check with the client to see if they understand what you are saying
- Allow the client time to ask questions, without allowing the client to take the interview completely off-track

If you are asked to make an application to the judge:

- Stand up (if it seems appropriate)
- Be respectful
- Speak clearly, and explicitly outline your argument and the relief you are seeking
- If the judge interrupts you or asks you questions designed to frustrate you or throw you off track, be respectful but firm—often the interviewer is trying to see if you are intimidated by authority

If you are asked to cross examine a witness:

- Remember to ask questions in a leading manner
- Carefully review the paperwork you are given; often there are glaring mistakes which the interviewer expects you to focus on

4. Panel Interview

If you are called for a follow-up interview, some offices will use a panel format. This will consist of the applicant fielding questions from a panel of attorneys (and sometimes investigators and other non-attorney staff). This may be efficient for the office, and it is also designed to test your ability to think quickly, speak effectively, and handle pressure.

One difficulty with the panel interview is staying focused while being hit with questions from multiple interviewers. Panelists may deliberately ask a question off the topic before you have had an adequate opportunity to fully answer the previous question. Respond by acknowledging the new question and say that you will get to that in just a moment, being very respectful and not sounding arrogant or annoyed. You should then quickly complete your answer to the previous question and answer the new question. Remaining calm, on topic and respectful is key to handling this type of interview. Also, remember to make eye contact with the entire panel, not just the person who asked the question. If there are non-lawyers on the panel, be careful not to act disrespectfully to them or respond dismissively to their questions. Panelists are evaluating you on your ability to interact with all types of people.

5. Your Questions

Be prepared with cogent, relevant questions to ask of your interviewers. Stick to areas that truly are important to you in making your decision of where to work. Training and

supervision are important areas to inquire about. Related topics include how quickly lawyers assume their own caseload and how the office evaluates the performance of its attorneys. If you research the office beforehand and know its structure and philosophy, you will be able to ask better questions and impress the interviewers with your level of preparation.