

GOVERNMENT LEGAL CAREERS

Handout Series #8

OVERVIEW

There are a wealth of opportunities for a legal career at all levels of government whether or not you receive a Governmental Affairs Certificate with your J.D. degree. Employment in the public sector can be a rewarding and challenging alternative to joining a law firm. There are positions for lawyers at the federal, state, county and city levels. The practice areas are as varied as private practice but can be quite specialized depending on the scope and jurisdiction of a particular agency or office.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Government Work

As with all career choices, there are both advantages and disadvantages to weigh when considering a career in public service. One of the main reasons many people pursue a career in public service is for the personal satisfaction that comes from knowing they are working “for the public good”. Many government jobs allow more responsibility earlier than that afforded associates with medium and large law firms. Due to budgetary constraints, many government law offices utilize a “learn by doing” approach to training. This accelerated method of learning provides the opportunity to gain substantive, hands on experience very early in your career. This combination of experience and early responsibility can make a few years spent as a government lawyer a very marketable entry to add to your resume.

The major disadvantage to being a government lawyer is that salaries are generally lower than those for lawyers working in private practice. Even if the starting salary is competitive for the area, it will probably increase on a fixed scale and may peak well below the salary of a partner in a law firm. While salaries may be lower, the stress level associated with high salaries and high billable hours may also be lower. Most government attorneys carry heavy workloads, but because their only client is the agency for which they work, they are not expected to bill their time. They are also free from the pressure of business development and networking with potential clients.

Each of the three arms of government (local, state and federal) offers a variety of career

opportunities. This handout will give you a brief overview and some ideas on how to get started. The handout includes a comprehensive list of Career Development Office resources to aid you in your research.

Since there is an enormous range of practice areas and specialties represented by local, state and federal government agencies, it is extremely important to be able to identify your particular interests as well as your personal strengths and weaknesses. Working with a career advisor will help you with this important self-assessment process.

Federal Government

The Federal Government employs thousands of practicing attorneys as well as many others with law degrees who work in law-related or nonlegal positions. About 45 percent of these lawyers are concentrated in the Washington D.C. area with the remaining attorneys in field offices throughout the United States. A small number have assignments abroad. Among the agencies that employ the largest number of attorneys are the Department of Justice and the Armed Forces. While virtually all federal agencies have attorney positions, it is wise to concentrate your job search on those agencies which hire the largest number of attorneys, unless you have specialized skills or interests that lend themselves to a particular agency.

Attorney positions in the Federal Government are categorized as “excepted service”. This means that attorney positions are not covered by regular civil service hiring procedures. Lawyers are in that category of government career professionals who do not have to compete for their positions under Office of Personnel Management (OPM) supervision. Agencies may hire for attorney positions directly without conducting examinations or going to the OPM for lists of eligible applicants.

As a result of the decentralization of attorney hiring, there is no single source for attorney jobs with the Federal Government. Lawyers must file the proper application materials with each agency that interests them, and in many cases with individual divisions or bureaus within an agency.

The proper place to begin your research depends upon where you are in your job search.

Narrow the Range of Possibilities:

You will first need to narrow down the range of possibilities by identifying your interests. Begin by reading about and understanding the nature of the legal work performed by each of the various agencies. This research step is very important and should not be overlooked. Do not assume that the name of an agency provides enough information to exclude it as a possibility.

CDO has a number of books that are available for your review:

Hiring Program Information for Federal Government Agencies Which Employ Significant Numbers of Attorneys

Suggested Resource Materials for Information on Legal Employment in the Federal Government

Now Hiring: Government Jobs for Lawyers

This last book is a publication of the American Bar Association which identifies federal agencies that employ attorneys, the number of attorneys employed, where they are located and other information. The descriptions also include a section on the nature of that agency's legal work. This book is available for checkout from the CDO Resource Library. A looseleaf copy is also available for easy photocopying. Another excellent resource is **The United States Government Manual**, available in the Gordon D. Schaber Library. This book is the official handbook of the Federal Government. It provides comprehensive information on the agencies of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

Once you have identified areas of interest, you can utilize the Internet to expand your research. Many federal agencies maintain websites that will give you the most up-to-date information available. For instance, the you can get employment information for the Department of Justice is at <http://search.usdoj.gov/oarm>. You can pick up a copy of the CDO handout **Internet Websites for Your Job Search**. This handout lists a number of websites dedicated to employment with the federal government. The Office of Personnel Management maintains a federal government employment information system called **USAJOBS** <http://www.usajobs.com>. This website contains worldwide job information for all types of government jobs and includes a section for attorney positions. Due to the decentralization of the hiring process, however, not all attorney jobs are listed with this service.

One of the best ways to secure a job with the Federal Government is by working for an agency during the summer in either a paid position, as a volunteer, or through one of the many summer intern programs. **The Federal Government, Honor & Summer Law Intern Programs** which contains information and deadlines for federal agencies with summer intern & honors program position is available on line. Please ask for the login Id and the password. These positions are highly competitive and it is essential to pay close attention to the application deadlines. More information about the Legal Intern Program, including links to Department directories of U.S. Attorneys' Offices, Department field offices and Department organizations' web sites, is available on the OARM web page: <http://www.usdoj.gov/oarm/lawvolunteer>

The McGeorge Off-Campus Clinical Program also offers a number of placements with federal government agencies. Pick up an **Off-Campus Clinical Brochure**, available in the Clinical Programs Office and also in the Career Development Office.

Viewing current job announcements is another way to research Federal Government employment. Even if you are not ready to apply, you can review the job descriptions and get an idea of the qualifications required. See the **Direct Application Binders** located in the CDO Lobby and at the Reserve Desk in the library for all current job announcements received by our

office from local, state and federal government agencies which are hiring for summer positions or for positions after graduation.

If you are seeking a state job for the first time or advancing in state service, you need to get on an eligibility list that is open. Lists are open for only specific periods of time and you must apply during that period. Every week, the publication **Capitol Weekly** publishes examination announcements. If you are already on a state eligibility list or are a current state employee, you can apply for any open state job for which you qualify. These are listed each week in this publication. For a comprehensive explanation of California state hiring procedures, pick up a copy of the Career Development Office handout **State of California Hiring**. This handout will give you a step-by-step breakdown of the process of securing a job with the State of California.

The Internet is also a valuable resource for information. Most state agencies have websites with excellent descriptions of agency functions and types of employment offered. Pick up a copy of the CDO Handout, **Internet Websites for your Job Search**, which will lead you to many of the state agency websites. For instance, the job website for the California Attorney General is: <http://www.ag.ca.gov/careers>

Contacting Others

If you are seeking state government employment in a state other than California, you should begin by contacting that individual state's employment department for information on the state's hiring procedures and practices. The Internet will also lead you to employment information for the state in which you are interested.

Local Government

Securing a job with a local government entity is challenging because there are so many potential places to look. 1. District Attorney, 2. Public Defender, 3. County Counsel and 4. City Attorneys' offices employ large numbers of lawyers, including many recent graduates. While the District Attorney and Public Defender work exclusively with criminal prosecution and defense matters, the County Counsel and City Attorney deal with a wide range of issues and areas of law that affect local government.

One of the best ways to obtain a permanent position with local government is by doing a summer internship, clinical externship or volunteer work for the organization in which you are interested. This can be a huge advantage when applying for a position after law school. The McGeorge Off-Campus Clinical Program offers a number of placements with local government agencies. Pick up an **Off-Campus Clinical Brochure**, available in the Clinical Programs Office and in the Career Development Office. The **Government Direct Application Binder** in the Career Development Office Lobby contains current job announcements for paid summer internship positions, volunteer opportunities and permanent positions after graduation.

CDO LIBRARY RESOURCES

Federal Government

Now Hiring: Government Jobs for Lawyers, American Bar Association, Law Student Division, 1997. Hiring information on various branches of the U.S. Government.

The Almanac of American Politics 2002, National Journal. In depth profiles and photographs of all 50 governors and all 535 Members of Congress, with their voting records.

How to Find an Overseas Job with the U.S. Government, Will Cantrell & Francine Moddero, 1992. A comprehensive guide to overseas openings with a variety of government agencies, which includes actual job vacancy listings, hundreds of application addresses, and “how-to” information on taking the Foreign Service exam and completing the SF-171.

The Harvard College Guide to Careers in Government & Politics, Lynn Bracken Wehnes, 1992. A comprehensive look at specific opportunities within the public service and related fields and a feel for what may be involved in seeking such a career.

United States Department of Justice - Legal Activities, 1997-98. Legal Activities book for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Changing Jobs - A Handbook for Lawyers for the 1990's, Heidi L. McNeil, ABA. Designed to assist those who are thinking about changing their current legal positions or even leaving the law business entirely.

Opportunities in Law Careers, Gary Munneke, 1994. Designed to help you explore the many career paths available.

Washington Information Directory, Congressional Quarterly, 2003-2004. More than 5,000 information sources.

America's Greatest Places to Work With a Law Degree - And How to Make the Most of Any Job, No Matter Where it is!, Kimm Alayne Walton, 1999. Features hundreds of traditional & non-traditional employers nationwide.

Guide to Law Specialties, National Association for Law Placement, 1996. Essays written by practicing attorneys and law professors to provide an introduction to the nature of day-to-day practice within a broad spectrum of law specialties.

The Federal Resume Guidebook, Kathryn K. Troutman, 1995. Complete instructions and samples for writing or converting your SF-171 into a competitive federal resume. Includes PC or Mac disk with formatted federal resume template and sample.

State and Local Government

California Journal, 2003 Roster & Government Guide, State & Federal Government Roster.

Legal Careers in New York State Government, Government Law Center of Albany Law School.
A comprehensive guide to getting a job with the State of New York.

Opportunities in Law Careers, Gary Munneke, 1994. Designed to help you explore the many career paths available.

Directory of Legal Aid and Defender Offices in the United States and Territories, National Legal Aid and Defender Association, 1995/96.

America's Greatest Places to Work With a Law Degree - And How to Make the Most of Any Job, No Matter Where it is!, Kimm Alayne Walton, 1999. Features hundreds of traditional & non-traditional employers nationwide.

Guide to Law Specialties, National Association for Law Placement, 1996. Essays written by practicing attorneys and law professors to provide an introduction to the nature of day-to-day practice within a broad spectrum of law specialities.