



Government Careers

Introduction

At first glance, seeking and applying for federal jobs can seem incredibly overwhelming, and you may not know where to begin your search. Below you will find information about where to find federal government jobs and how to apply successfully for those jobs. Our hope is that this information, though not exhaustive, will help you navigate the federal hiring process.

Links to these resources are available at PSLawNet - <http://www.pslawnet.org/governmentcareers>

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Why Work for the United States Government?

Lawyers working for the federal government report high levels of satisfaction with their jobs. Federal employment offers significant responsibility early in one's career, intellectually challenging work, and an opportunity to serve the public good. In addition, the federal government offers the highest attorney salaries in the public sector and wonderful work/life benefits, including reasonable and flexible work hours. Aside from work on criminal matters – profiled on PSLawNet's [Prosecutor/Public Defender Careers](#) page – government lawyers work on everything from constitutional issues to coal mine safety regulation. Also, they work in all three branches of government, although most are employed in the executive branch.

Reasons to consider federal employment:

- *Guess Who's Hiring?* – An expected large-scale retirement by Baby Boomers in the next decade is likely to leave many federal positions open for new attorneys to fill. One-third of full-time federal employees are expected to leave their jobs in the next five years.
- *From Constitutional Law to Coal Mine Regulation* – Attorneys work in all three branches of government and in numerous capacities, including litigating civil and criminal cases, counseling lawmakers, drafting statutes and regulations, issuing administrative legal opinions, and much more.
- *Immediate Responsibility* – Attorneys working for the federal government develop key leadership skills quickly as a result of managing their own caseloads and other significant immediate responsibilities.
- *Where in the World?* – 85% of federal jobs are located outside of the Washington, DC area, and almost 50,000 federal employees work outside the U.S.
- *Lighten the Debt Load* – Many federal agencies have their own loan repayment assistance programs. Learn more about [federal student loan repayment programs](#), and note that the recently passed [College Cost Reduction & Access Act](#) can benefit attorneys working in the federal government.
- *High-end Public Interest Pay* – Federal jobs tend to pay better than jobs with nonprofit organizations. Starting salaries for entry level federal attorneys are generally in the \$50,000 range. From there, federal attorneys can move up the salary scale quickly. See [Resources to Help You Find a Position with the Federal Government](#) for more information.

For more about the benefits of working for the federal government, two attorneys share their personal experience – an [attorney for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) and an [attorney for the IRS Office of Chief Counsel, General Legal Services](#).

Learn more about opportunities with the federal government at [Making the Difference](#), a federal careers website operated jointly by the [Office of Personnel Management](#) and the [Partnership for Public Service](#).

Types of Practice for Lawyers in the Federal Government

Branches of Government

All three branches of the federal government employ attorneys: the **executive** (the President and his or her administration), the **legislative** (the Senate and the House of Representatives), and the **judicial**. In addition, the federal government includes many independent agencies such as the [National Labor Relations Board](#), the [Federal Communications Commission](#), the [Federal Reserve System](#) and the [Smithsonian](#). Among the three branches and independent agencies, the executive branch and independent agencies employ the greatest number of attorneys. In 2008, there were some 97,000 employees with full-time, permanent legal positions with executive and independent agencies.^[1] In contrast, the number of

attorney jobs in the legislature – often referred to as “on the Hill” – is smaller, as is the number of jobs with the judiciary. For more information about working on the Hill, see Yale Law School’s Guide, “[Working on Capitol Hill](#)”.

Practice Areas

When most law students think of being a lawyer, they think of litigation – filing and trying lawsuits in court. But lawyers in the federal government are just as likely to draft and interpret regulations, advise and counsel other federal employees, and write policy.

- **Litigation** – If you know you want to litigate, consider the **Department of Justice** (DOJ). The DOJ is the central agency for the enforcement of federal laws and consequently is the main litigating branch of the U.S. government. The DOJ is composed of headquarters in D.C. and 93 U.S. Attorneys Offices throughout the country. DOJ hires over 150 recent law graduates every year through the Attorney General’s Honors Program; most Honors positions are in D.C., though a few are in other major cities throughout the country. Honors Attorneys work in component areas that range from Civil Rights to the Executive Office for Immigration Review. Some attorneys at DOJ do not litigate but instead provide advice and counsel; for example, attorneys in the Office of Legal Counsel and the Federal Bureau of Prisons rarely litigate and focus instead on providing analysis and advice. In addition to the DOJ, attorneys at many other federal agencies are also involved in litigation. Offices with independent litigating authority include the **Department of Labor, Office of the Solicitor** and the **Securities Exchange Commission, Division of Enforcement**. Finally, the majority of agencies have “coordinate jurisdiction” with the DOJ, meaning that DOJ attorneys initiate all lawsuits and handle any depositions and oral arguments, while the agency attorneys draft the legal papers and provide the subject-matter expertise.
- **Regulatory** – Regulatory lawyers are at the forefront of forming and enforcing new rules. Agencies such as the **Food and Drug Administration** (FDA), **Environmental Protection Agency** (EPA), **Occupational Safety and Health Administration** (OSHA), and many others are considered regulatory agencies, because they are empowered to create and implement rules and regulations.
- **Advisory** – If you think you would enjoy working with clients to help them comply with the law, you should investigate “attorney advisor” or “counselor” positions. For example, lawyers at the **Food and Drug Administration** are divided into “counselors” and “litigators.” The counselors work on congressional inquiries, Freedom Of Information Act requests, rulemaking and citizen petitions.
- **Public Policy** – Individuals who want to work in public policy should look beyond “attorney” positions. Agencies that are engaged in a lot of policy work include the **Department of State, Department of Commerce**, and **Congressional Research Service**. An excellent entrée to federal policy-making is the Presidential Management Fellows Program (PMF). The PMF Program is a two-year fellowship that places over 700 graduate students (including J.D. 3Ls and LL.M.s) in public policy and management positions with executive agencies. Possible placements include the **Department of Defense**, the **Millennium Challenge Corporation**, the **Department of State**, and the **Department of Health and Human Services**. Detailed information is available at the [PMF website](#).

Where Are the Federal Government Jobs?

Within the executive branch, the agencies with the most attorneys are:

	<u>Attorneys</u>	<u>Projected FY 2007-09 Attorney Hires</u>
Department of Justice	8503	1624
Department of Treasury	2142	427
Department of Homeland Security	1363	505
Securities and Exchange Commission	1350	258

These figures reflect only those law school graduates who are working *specifically as attorneys*. There are many jobs that are filled by attorneys but not classified as attorney positions. One of the biggest challenges for a graduating law student or attorney seeking to enter federal employment is to discover where, in the enormous and intricate bureaucracy of the United States government, he or she will be able to make the best contribution. From environmental work with the **Department of Agriculture** to labor law for the **Department of Transportation**, the federal government offers positions in every conceivable area of law. To learn about agencies and opportunities, see the website for **The Partnership for Public Service** and utilize *Federal Careers for Attorneys* (published online by Westlaw), which provides descriptions of over 3,000 federal legal offices in the U.S. and abroad and is searchable by agency, location, and practice area.

Jobs for Students, Recent Graduates, and Experienced Attorneys

Student Internships

Just about every legal office in the federal government hosts summer interns and most host interns during the academic year as well. A terrific resource for finding these opportunities is the **Government Honors & Internship Guide** published by the University of Arizona, College of Law, which highlights summer and entry-level opportunities at a number of agencies. Speak to your career services counselor to see if your school has access to the Guide. If you do not have access to the Guide or are interested in additional opportunities, do not hesitate to research federal agencies and contact them directly about internships for law students.

Note that many federal offices hire paid interns as well as volunteers. For 1Ls, compensation for paid internships is generally based on the GS-7 scale, or \$7500 for ten weeks of work, while 2Ls are paid based on the GS-9 scale, or approximately \$9250 for ten weeks of work. Compensation varies by agency.

Recent Law Graduates/Entry-Level Attorneys

There are three main avenues through which recent law school graduates seek federal government employment:

- *Direct Hiring* – All three branches routinely hire attorneys and staffers with legal training. The main conduit for finding and applying for federal jobs is **The U.S. Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Official Job Site**, called USA Jobs. See **Resources to Help you Find a Position with the Federal Government** for information on how to search and apply for jobs via USA Jobs. Current 3Ls should know that many agencies require applicants to have passed a bar exam, but some agencies will post opportunities for which graduating students are eligible, and the successful applicant will have a specified time period in which to sit for and be admitted to a bar.
- *Honors Programs* – Many federal agencies hire new attorneys primarily (and sometimes solely) through an "Honors Program." The most comprehensive resource for post-graduate Honors Program is the **Government Honors & Internship Guide** published by the University of Arizona, College of Law.

- The **Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) Program** is a competitive program that recruits masters, law, and doctoral-level students to policy and management jobs (not attorney positions) in the federal government. Students must apply in the fall of their final year of school and should contact their career service offices for information on the nomination and application process.

Graduates may wish to consider civil service jobs for which a law degree and/or legal experience may be useful but not a requirement, such as Paralegal Specialist, Hearings and Appeals Specialist, Contract Specialist, Labor Relations Specialist, and Estate Tax Examiner. See **Attorneys in the Federal Service** on USA Jobs.

Experienced Attorney Jobs

The main conduit for finding and applying for federal jobs is **The U.S. Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Official Job Site**, called USA Jobs. See **Resources to Help you Find a Position with the Federal Government** for information on how to search and apply for jobs via USA Jobs.

In addition to attorney positions, an experienced attorney may consider applying for a position as an Administrative Law Judge (ALJ). Many agencies, including the **Securities and Exchange Commission**, the **Social Security Administration**, and the **Department of Labor**, hire attorneys with at least seven years experience for these positions. ALJs conduct formal hearings to resolve disputes between government agencies and someone affected by a decision of that agency. The Office of Personnel Management administers competitive examinations to fill all ALJ positions.

Practicing Law in the Military

A military legal career offers significant immediate responsibility for managing cases and exposure to a wide variety of law. There are different branches of the military in which you can serve as JAG Corps attorney, either as an entry-level or experienced attorney: **United States Air Force JAG Corps**, **United States Army JAG Corps**, **United States Coast Guard JAG Corps**, **United States Marine JAG Corps** and **United States Navy JAG Corps**.

Resources To Help You Find a Position with the Federal Government

- **USAJobs.gov** – This is the official job site of the United States Government, and the majority of all federal job openings are posted on this website. You can complete a job search by job type, location, salary, agency and other criteria. Job seekers can become members of USA Jobs, at no cost, and then post resumes online, apply to jobs directly through the website, and receive automated email alerts of recent job openings.
- **United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions Book** – This publication, commonly referred to as the *Plum Book*, is published every four years, just after the Presidential election. The *Plum Book* contains data (as of September 1, 2008) of over 7,000 Federal jobs that are political appointee positions. If you find a position that interests you, apply directly through that agency. See **Political vs. Career Hires** for information on political hires.
- The University of Arizona **2008-09 Government Honors and Internship Handbook** – This handbook provides application information and deadlines for federal, state and local honors programs and internships, including deadline tables arranged alphabetically by agency and by class year. The guide is geared to current students seeking summer employment and entry-level positions. Annual online subscriptions (\$175 for 2008-09) are available to law schools for distribution to their students and graduates. Law students and graduates are advised to contact their career services offices for information on accessing this resource.
- **Guide to Public Sector Legal Job Applications** – This Georgetown University Law Center publication includes tips for constructing resumes and other application materials. Note that most federal resumes requested through

USA Jobs require *more detail* than traditional legal resumes. See [How Do I Make my Application a Success?](#) for more information.

- **Working on Capitol Hill** – Yale Law School's guidebook breaks down the types of employment opportunities available on the Hill and includes personal narratives from Hill employees.
- **May 2008 Report on Federal Student Loan Repayment Programs** – This report by the Office of Personnel Management outlines executive branch agency use of loan repayment programs in recruitment and retention efforts.
- **Guide to Criminal Prosecution Careers** – This Yale Law School publication provides information on both summer and permanent hiring processes in U.S. Attorneys' and local prosecutors' offices. For more information on careers in criminal justice, see PSLawNet's [Prosecution/Public Defense Career Resource Page](#).

Titles and Terminology for Federal Hiring

Civil Service Positions

There are more than two million people employed as federal civil servants. The federal civil service system includes all appointed positions in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government, except for military positions in the uniformed services. The civil service consists of i) competitive service positions; ii) excepted service positions; and iii) Senior Executive Service (SES) Positions. The primary differences among these three services are in appointment procedures and in job protections.

- *The Competitive Service* – The majority of Federal Government employees are hired through what is known as the “competitive service,” for which the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) posts open positions on [USAJobs.gov](#) and applicants compete in a merit system organized by OPM for those jobs.
- *The Excepted Service* – All attorney positions in the Federal Government are in the excepted service, typically under an appointment called “Schedule A.”^[2] Therefore, agencies may hire for attorney positions directly without conducting examinations or working through OPM. Because excepted service positions do not have to be advertised on USA Jobs, it is important to look at individual agency websites for job announcements; nevertheless, applicants will often be sent from those agency websites to USA Jobs. See [Making the Difference](#) for more information about excepted service.
- *The Senior Executive Service (SES)* – Senior Executive Service employees are primarily managers and supervisors, just below the top Presidential appointees. OPM manages SES hiring with a unique set of regulations. See [USA Jobs](#) for more information.

Political vs. Career Hires

In addition to civil servants, federal agencies have political appointees. Under the Pendleton Civil Service Act, government officials are prohibited from considering candidates' political affiliations when hiring for civil service positions. In contrast, political appointees are selected by the President or Congress to serve in specified leadership positions. The vast majority of jobs with the federal government are competitive service positions. For example, the Office of the General Counsel for the Department of Health and Human Services employs about 400 attorneys, only 4-5 of whom are political appointees. The rest are hired, and will continue to serve, even as administrations change and the political appointees come and go.

State and Local Government

Just like the federal government, state and local government attorneys handle a broad range of legal issues and are housed in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Think of any area of our everyday lives that is subject to

government regulation – government attorneys are at work to craft policy, draft laws and rules, advise elected and appointed officials, and represent the interests of citizens in court.

Compensation and LRAP

Government Salaries

Most federal government employees are compensated based on the General Schedule (GS), which is set annually. New law graduates usually start at GS-9 or GS-11 (in agency Honors Programs). Attorneys may also receive locality pay if they live in a more expensive part of the country. For example, in 2008 an attorney at the GS-11 grade working in NYC would earn \$60,840, and would earn over \$100,000 after four years of service. However, that same attorney working in Indianapolis would earn \$54,653, and would earn \$92,049 after four years of service because of the difference in locality pay. The **General Schedule and Locality Pay tables**, which include a salary calculator, list the different federal salary levels.

Agencies that belong to the **Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council** (including the **Federal Reserve Board**, the **Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation**, and the **Comptroller of the Currency**) pay significantly above the GS scale. For example, in 2008, first year attorneys with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in DC earned \$85,416.

Federal Loan Repayment Assistant Program (LRAP)

The federal student loan repayment assistant program (LRAP) launched fairly recently, in 2002. This program allows agencies to repay federally insured student loans as recruitment or retention incentives for employees of the agency.

Under the LRAP, federal employees can receive up to \$10,000 per year in student loan repayments, and up to \$60,000 total. In return, they must commit to at least three years of agency service. If an employee quits or is fired for just cause or poor performance, he/she must reimburse the paying agency for all benefits received. In addition, an employee has to perform at an acceptable level in order to continue to receive payment benefits.

To learn more about the Student Loan Repayment Program, visit the **Office of Personnel Management's website**.

College Cost Reduction & Access Act of 2007 (CCRAA)

Federal legislation titled the College Cost Reduction & Access Act created a new repayment option for qualifying public service lawyers, called Income Based Repayment (IBR), **AND** established a loan forgiveness program that will forgive eligible educational debt after a 120-month (10-year) period of repayment. The program is designed so that after paying via IBR for period of time, a public service lawyer may be qualified to have the rest of his or her eligible loans forgiven.

- ***Income-Based Repayment*** – Through IBR, high debt/low income borrowers can significantly reduce their monthly payments if they can demonstrate “partial financial hardship,” as defined in the CCRAA statutory and regulatory language. It is essentially a calculation based on the amount of your eligible debt and your income. You do not have to be poverty-stricken to qualify for IBR; on the contrary, its provisions are generous.
- ***Public Service Loan Forgiveness*** – Borrowers working in a broadly-defined group of public service jobs may have qualified educational loans forgiven after a period of ten years (120 monthly payments) working in public service, provided that during that period they make monthly payments via the IBR Program (or through a combination of IBR and other payments).

For more information on CCRAA, check out these sites:

- [CCRAA Resource Page](#) – Equal Justice Works
- [CCRAA Resource Page](#) – The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators
- [Information on the CCRAA's Income Based Repayment and Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs](#) – The Project on Student Debt

Security Clearances and Citizenship Requirements

Security Clearances

Most attorneys working for the U.S. government must pass security clearances. Law student interns generally must gain security clearance as well, although the process for summer employment is considerably shorter. If U.S. government employment is your goal and you engage in any illegal or questionable behavior, such as recreational drug use or inappropriate web postings, clean up your act! For example, attorneys with the Department of Justice undergo an investigation that includes a name and fingerprint check; interviews with references, close personal associates, former spouses, former employers, co-workers, neighbors, landlords, and educational institutions; a drug test; and a thorough check of credit, military, tax, and police records. The background investigation covers a period of seven to ten years. This process may take seven months or more to complete. As you move through a security clearance, you must answer all questions completely and accurately. Think carefully about your answers, and don't hesitate to consult with a career services counselor if you have any questions. Students and alumni have been found ineligible for federal positions based on past activities that, had they been properly disclosed, would not have been a bar to employment. The Partnership for Public Service provides [information on security clearances](#) for prospective federal job applicants.

Citizenship Requirements

Many attorney jobs with the federal government are open only to U.S. citizens. Still others are technically open to citizens of foreign countries but extend offers to non-U.S. citizens only in extraordinary circumstances. Finally, at those agencies that regularly hire foreign citizens, the problems of conducting a security check overseas (e.g., interviewing employers, friends and family in a different time zone and in a foreign language) can significantly delay the start date of employment. If you are not a U.S. citizen or hold dual citizenship and would like to consider federal employment, please make an appointment to meet with a career services advisor.

How Do I Make my Application a Success?

Federal Resumes and KSAs

- *Federal Resumes* – [USA Jobs](#) provides advice about federal resumes and KSAs. Federal resumes require more detail than traditional legal resumes; applicants must specify dates and number of hours worked per week, for example. Candidates should use the key words in the job description, or “Duties,” as labeled in USA Jobs, in their resumes to describe prior experience. Applicants can save up to five different resumes on USA Jobs to use for varied job announcements, and you should tailor your resume specifically to each job for which you apply.
- *Knowledge, Skills, & Abilities (KSAs)* – Applicants to federal jobs are often required to write Knowledge, Skills & Abilities (KSAs) or narrative statements addressing the selection factors for the job. Whether the application requires KSAs or narrative statements, applicants should write first person descriptions of their experiences, with specific examples and quantitative measures when possible. The Partnership for

Public Service provides advice on KSAs, and suggests that candidates use the “CCAR” approach – Context, Challenges, Approach, and Results – to describe experiences and demonstrate skills and success. See *KSA Writing & Federal Resumes* and *A Guide to KSA Writing* for more information from the Partnership for Public Service.

[1] Data available on Fedscope, <http://www.fedscope.opm.gov/>. “Legal positions” includes attorneys as well as administrative law judges, various administrative and managerial positions, and paralegals.

[2] Positions excepted from the Competitive Service by OPM or by law are placed into three categories, Schedule A, B, or C, and each has its own hiring regulations. See <http://www.transitionjobs.us/federal-civil-service-outlining-three-categories> for further information.