

# **WORKING FOR THE GOVERNMENT: CITY, COUNTY, STATE AND FEDERAL**

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In the United States, lawyers work in all levels of government. Legal jobs can be found in city, county, state and federal settings. In assessing your interest in government work, it helps to identify the area of practice or the issue that attracts you, as a lawyer can practice in virtually any area of the law in a government setting.

## **Working for a City or Town**

Most cities of substantial size in the United States have a staff of lawyers, generally organized in a city law department, or office of corporation counsel, or city solicitor office. Lawyers in these offices may practice in areas such as tax assessment and collection, labor, eminent domain, historic preservation, real estate development and many others, including some specific to government practice, such as open meeting law and voting law. Municipal lawyers also do a significant amount of litigation, including contract claims, employment discrimination and other civil rights defense, tort defense and even medical malpractice defense on behalf of city hospitals. Municipal lawyers also act as general counsel to city and town departments and boards, such as the police department, the school department and the zoning board. Larger city departments may have dedicated counsel on staff as well. If the local government structure includes a deliberative body, such as a city council or a board of selectmen, these bodies often have a lawyer on staff.

Pay for a municipal lawyer ranges widely, depending on the city, but can generally be compared to salaries in a small to medium size law firm. Some cities (including Boston) have a residency requirement for city employees.

## **How To Find The Jobs**

Check the job listings of the local newspaper and the local newspaper that is dedicated to lawyers, such as *Lawyers Weekly*.

Network through the bar association; there is generally a committee or practice group focused on municipal law.

Volunteer during summers and the school year to make contacts and hear of openings before they are widely advertised.

Get involved in local politics and become a useful resource to an elected official. In general jobs open up after an election.

## **Working for a County**

Lawyers employed at the county level are generally working as criminal prosecutors for the County or District Attorney's Office. For more detailed information about these jobs, see other publications from Career Services and online about the prosecutor's career. Briefly, District Attorneys' offices prosecute all levels of crime, from misdemeanor to major felonies. The caseload is enormous and the pay is low to

moderate, but prosecutors report a higher level of job satisfaction than lawyers in nearly any other area of practice.

In some states, the jails are operated at the level of county government, often by elected sheriffs, who may employ an attorney as staff counsel.

### **How To Find The Jobs**

See *How To Get A Job in a Prosecutor's Office*, available in the Career Services Office.

### **Working for a State**

Lawyers are employed in all three branches of state government. **Employment in the executive branch includes:**

1. Working directly for the Governor as in-house counsel, or as staff. Lawyers in this setting review and draft legislation, work on personnel matters, liaison with the Attorney General on behalf of the Governor, draft executive orders and opinions and otherwise perform whatever vetting and counseling duties the Governor requires.

2. Working as/for counsel to a state executive agency, such as the agency responsible for environmental protection, social services, bank regulation, insurance regulation, taxation, corrections, parole and probation, transportation, child protection, consumer protection, elder protection, public health, public safety, energy, telecommunications, professional licensing and others. Agency counsel can be charged with civil enforcement of state statutes, including acting as civil prosecutors in administrative hearings. They can be involved in drafting state laws and in promulgating state regulations. They act as adviser to the Secretary or Commissioner or Director who heads the agency. They work closely with the Attorney General's Office. They can be administrative hearing officers deciding such matters as worker's compensation claims. Agency lawyers have the opportunity to do significant work very early in their careers and may become national experts in complex areas of government regulation much sooner than one would think.

3. Working for the Attorney General as an Assistant AG. The Attorney General is the chief law enforcement officer of the state. S/he may be elected or appointed. An Attorney General prosecutes crimes and generally has the jurisdiction to step into any criminal matter in the state, regardless of county lines. As a practical matter, most Attorneys General focus on crimes that cross county lines, complex matters that require more forensic support than is available to the counties, matters where s/he is called in by the district attorney (such as where there may be a conflict of interest) and larger matters that touch directly on a particular priority of the Attorney General, whether it be on-line enforcement or the protection of the elderly.

Attorneys General also are chief enforcers of the state civil laws and may have significant staff in area such as environmental protection, consumer protection, regulation of charities and trusts, enforcement of wage and hour laws, civil rights, antitrust, and others.

Finally, Attorneys General are litigation counsel to the Governor and the executive agencies and can enforce agency decisions and defend them when sued. They also handle appeals.

Salaries are low to medium in range at the entry level. The common denominator of an Assistant Attorney General is strong litigation skills.

**Employment in the legislative branch** includes working as staff counsel to a house or senate committee, or to an individual representative or senator. The dominant work is drafting legislation and reviewing proposed legislation. However, counsel can also be called on to handle personnel matters, advise on open meeting requirements, create document retention policies, communicate with the other branches of government and provide constituent services as well.

**Employment in the judicial branch** includes becoming staff counsel or permanent clerk to a court or a judge. These jobs are almost entirely dedicated to research and drafting on behalf of the judge as s/he makes decisions, both at the trial level and at the appellate level. Some courts also have staff lawyers as policy advisers or supervising their human resources office. In many states, the Public Defenders are a branch of the court system. And of course, the positions of judge and of magistrate are virtually always filled by lawyers. (For information on post graduate clerkships, see Career Services.)

#### **How to Find the Jobs:**

Most states post open positions on both the individual website of the entity looking to hire and on a central job bank. Bookmark and check frequently. Be especially alert for postings right after the news reports that the state budget for the year has been passed.

### **Working for the Federal Government**

Like the states, the federal government employs lawyers in all three branches of government. The United States government is the single largest employer of lawyers in the country.

**The executive bureaucracy** of the federal government is enormous and encompasses virtually every type of practice and practice setting. It includes the White House legal staff, all the cabinet offices and their reporting agencies, departments, offices and commissions, and the military legal corps.

New lawyers are often interested in working for the Department of Justice (DOJ), the cabinet level office of the United States Attorney General. It is located in Washington, DC and commonly referred to as "Main Justice." DOJ attorneys provide legal advice to the President, handle civil litigation in such areas as antitrust enforcement and civil rights enforcement and oversee the federal prisons. The DOJ also encompasses the Offices of the United States Attorneys (USA). There is one office in each state, headed by a Presidential appointee, which prosecutes federal criminal cases, handles civil asset forfeiture matters, and acts as field support for attorneys at Main Justice. DOJ hires entry level attorneys, mostly for Main Justice but occasionally for a USA office, through the Federal Honors Program.

Some of the other, larger agencies that employ significant numbers of attorneys, such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, also have a dedicated process for hiring at entry-level.

There is also the Presidential Management Fellowship program which is open to students in all disciplines who have completed a graduate degree. Being accepted to the program in its current format gives you access to a dedicated job fair where various agencies interview and hire for a two year stint in a management role. The program

changes significantly from year to year. Updated information is available at <https://www.pmf.opm.gov>

**How to Find the Jobs:**

The law school subscribes to the database maintained by the University of Arizona Law School, which provides detailed information on entry level hiring by the federal bureaucracy in one place. [www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm](http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm)  
Contact Career Services if you have not received or have misplaced, your password for this site.

Online, the site [www.USAJobs.gov](http://www.USAJobs.gov) also offers extensive listings.

The Department of Justice has a website for its honors program at: <http://www.usdoj.gov/oarm/arm/hp/hp.htm>

**Legislative** work on Capitol Hill is similar to working for a state legislature. However, even more so than when working for a state legislature, federal legislative aids are encouraged to become experts in complex areas of law, which lends credibility and increases the productivity of the committee or individual you work for. Party affiliation can be required and elected representatives and senators like to hire constituents.

**How to Find the Jobs:**

The website [www.hillzoo.com](http://www.hillzoo.com) lists openings.

While the **federal courts**, as you would expect, are extensively staffed with lawyers both on the bench and in supporting roles, those jobs tend to be prestigious, quite well paid and mostly unavailable to new lawyers. (Occasionally there are entry level staff attorney positions at the circuit courts, which are advertised on the websites of the courts and through local legal newspapers.) While you may consider this an option for later in your career, most law students are primarily interested in obtaining post-graduate clerkships. These are typically one-year appointments to the chambers of an individual federal judge to provide research and drafting support and to receive mentoring and training in litigation or appellate advocacy. Boston College Law School encourages its students to consider clerking opportunities.

**How to Find the Jobs:**

For much more information, see the handout on judicial clerkships in the Career Services office and additional material on line at the clerkship link under the Career Services web page at: <http://www.bc.edu/schools/law/services/career/clerkships.html>