Pathways to Federal Employment

A career in the federal government can be highly rewarding. You will perform work of importance to our society, often with a great deal of responsibility early in your career, and serve the public good, while likely earning a higher salary than in many other public sector positions. Compared to those in law firm settings, new attorneys in federal government may work independently more quickly, and have opportunities to try different areas of practice.

Richmond Law is fortunate to have a sizeable number of alumni working in the federal government. Many of these alums are willing to help students who are seeking internships or permanent employment in the federal government. Most alumni working in federal government agencies relate that they created connections with those agencies while in law school. They may have applied for traditional internships, such as summer honors programs or Pathways programs, or they may have simply volunteered, finding an alum or other connection willing to supervise them. Some of these alumni worked in the Washington, DC location of a given agency; others worked in a Richmond branch or elsewhere. Some found opportunities through honors attorney programs, Pathways programs, or specialized opportunities such as the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program. Gaining experience with and connections in federal agencies can be very important in launching a post-graduate career in the federal government.

Richmond law students find internship opportunities by applying to posted announcements, including Pathways opportunities, and by reaching out and making connections with attorneys in agencies of interest to them. Posted internships may be paid or unpaid; opportunities that students find through their connections are usually unpaid.

Choosing where to focus
Each agency in the federal government (and each division within each agency) has its own purpose and mission. Hiring officials seek those who are interested in furthering the mission of the organization, regardless of what their specific role in the agency might be. If you have a demonstrated commitment to a particular agency’s mission, this focus may outweigh other important factors such as grades.

- When researching an agency where you wish to work, learn about its divisions. Some, such as civil litigation divisions, are highly sought-after, and therefore more competitive. There may be more opportunities with other divisions, some of which may be more related to the agency’s mission than litigation. Agency websites may list divisions and their focus. You may have opportunities in the future to transfer to or work a temporary detail in your preferred division.
- When seeking an internship, note that not all agencies take interns. If an agency does not have a structured internship program, your experience may or may not be meaningful, as attorneys may not be experienced in supervising interns.
• While most federal government positions are located in Washington, DC, many are located in cities throughout the United States and its territories. Looking for positions in off-the-beaten path localities may open up more opportunities for you.

• Different agencies, and divisions within agencies, may have their own work cultures and styles. This may influence your search, as well as how you craft your cover letter. Alumni can help you determine whether an agency or division is more progressive or more traditional, and which applications are likely to earn a response.

Finding your niche
Every agency, regardless of its purpose, will have positions in various practice areas. For instance, one alumna who works for Customs and Border Protection specializes in environmental law. Another alumnus who works in the Commodity Futures Trading Commission specializes in e-discovery compliance. Your interest in a particular practice area should not limit your search options when you are considering where to apply.

• Not all positions that are law-related are attorney positions. Many are advisory, policy, or compliance-related. Opportunities abound in positions that require legal expertise—such as policy advisor, policy analyst, asylum officer, hearings specialist, appeals specialist, environmental protection specialist, estate tax examiner, or adjudicator.

• Many agencies allow employees to participate in “details”—short-term assignments to another department or division. Some programs, such as honors and PMF, include detail rotations as part of the training experience. Detail assignments can allow someone to gain litigation experience, for instance, even if that person is working in a non-litigation position.

How to find opportunities
For opportunities to which you may apply prior to graduation, you will need to look for honors attorney and Pathways positions, or programs such as the Presidential Management Fellows. Check the Government Honors and Internship Handbook (listed below) for information about application deadlines for federal honors attorney positions as well as internships.

• Check organization websites for instructions on how that agency hires new attorneys. Most agency websites have a “Careers” tab that specifies how the agency hires, sometimes lists open positions, or discusses their honors attorneys and pathways programs.

• You should also set up alerts on USAjobs, the federal government’s jobs clearinghouse, as many federal agencies do not list open positions on their websites. Make sure you set your search parameters broadly: in addition to “attorney” use terms such as “legal,” “law,” and “compliance,” as well as practice areas that interest you such as “immigration,” “environment,” “criminal.” You also may want to note the job-series codes for positions and set up search alerts for these: for instance, the code for attorney is 0905; the code for environmental protection specialist is 0028. To ensure that you are setting your sights high enough and not just ending up with a list of legal secretary positions, set the pay-grade range on your search from 9 to 11.

• Some positions are posted on an agency’s website and in USAjobs, but some may be posted only to one or the other, so check both.
• Pathways, honors, and programs such as PMF may be shorter-term (one or two years) employment but are usually eligible for “conversion” to permanent employment at the end of the term, or eligible to apply for positions to which only current federal employees may apply.
• Some positions, including attorney positions, are considered “excepted service” and are exempt from public notice requirements, and may not be advertised.

How to apply
• Your cover letter is even more important for public sector jobs, including federal positions, than it is for most law firm opportunities. The cover letter should mention any relevant coursework or pending coursework, your connection to the mission of the agency, your desire to work in the public sector, and any connections with those who work at the agency of interest (even if minimal).
• Discuss with your career advisor whether you should submit a regular legal resume, or a skills-based federal-style resume.
• Check with your career advisor to see if there are alumni in the department to which you are applying who may be able to help with your application.
• If the job posting does not list a contact to whom you should address your cover letter, discuss with your career advisor how to address the letter.
• Read and follow the application directions of the posting very carefully.

RESOURCES
USA Jobs: official job announcement site for the U.S. Government: https://www.usajobs.gov/


Presidential Management Fellows program: http://www.pmf.gov

Office of Personnel Management information on hiring programs for students and recent graduates: http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/hiring-authorities/students-recent-graduates/
