

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.

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 found opportunities through 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 their post-graduate 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.

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 opportunities with other divisions, some of which may be more even more related to the agency's mission. For example, the Office of Environmental Justice at the EPA is charged with fairly treating and meaningfully involving all people in the environmental decision-making process. Agency websites may list divisions and their focus. If you find a position in one division of an agency, you may have more 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. Some agencies, or divisions, may have such stringent and in-depth background checks that they cannot

accommodate 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 or handing off projects to 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 PMF. 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,” and “criminal.” 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. You also may want to note the job-series codes for positions you are interested in, and set up search alerts for these: for instance, the code for attorney is GS-0905; the code for environmental protection

specialist is GS-0028. The Office of Personnel Management links at the end of this information sheet explain the various position classifications; you can also find a list of General Schedule (“GS”) job-series codes here: <https://www.federalpay.org/jobs/gs>

- 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 other 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). Address qualifications listed in the job posting in your cover letter.
- Discuss with your career advisor whether you should submit a regular legal resume, or a skills-based federal-style resume. For either, use “buzzwords” from the job posting in your position descriptions.
- 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/>

The PSJD Federal Legal Employment Opportunities Guide:

http://www.psjd.org/2014_2015_Federal_Legal_Employment_Opportunities_Guide

The Government Honors and Internship Handbook (obtain login credentials from CDO):

http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/Government_Honors2014-15/Contents.cfm

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/>

Office of Personnel Management position classification standard for general attorney series:

<http://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/classification-qualifications/classifying-general-schedule-positions/standards/0900/gso905.pdf>