

How to Get a Federal Attorney Position

(prepared by Career Services)

There are two main hiring avenues for entry-level attorney positions in the Federal Government:

- Honors Programs – These are highly competitive programs to recruit 3Ls, recent graduates, and judicial law clerks to work for a federal agency for at least 2 years, starting in the fall after graduating or finishing a judicial clerkship, and they typically lead to permanent positions.
 - Honors Programs are often the only way agencies hire entry-level attorneys.
 - Most programs, requirements, and deadlines are listed in the Government Honors and Internship Handbook from University of Arizona, but some honors programs are not offered yearly and are not consistently listed.
 - Timelines for Honors Program hiring vary; the deadline for some agencies is in early September of one's 3L year, some are rolling, and some are not until February.
 - Most Honors Programs hire for Washington, D.C. offices, but some hire for offices all over the country. Every agency is different.
- Direct Hiring – Departments, agencies, and bureaus often post listings to hire individual attorneys on USAJobs.gov or on their website.
 - Attorney positions in the Federal Government are categorized as “excepted service,” which means that they are exempt from the traditional, competitive civil service hiring procedures.
 - Agencies may hire for these positions directly without posting a listing to USAJobs.gov.
 - There is no centralized database for federal attorney positions.
 - You must look on an individual agency website to see if they are hiring attorneys, and what their application procedures entail.
 - Networking and having contacts within the agency will be very helpful for finding these jobs since agencies do not have to publicize these positions.
 - Once you have government contacts, pass out your resume. Some hiring is based only on an agency's existing pool of resumes.

Things you can do throughout law school to set yourself up for success:

- Network
 - Since many federal attorney jobs are not posted through official channels, it is very important to network with people in the agencies where you want to work.
 - Talk to professors, the CPDC, and your mentors to find people who would be willing to talk to you about their experiences working for the federal government.
 - Set up informational interviews with government attorneys.
 - Join organizations that will bring you in to contact with government attorneys, like related bar associations or relevant state bar sections.

- Extern or Intern
 - One of the best ways to demonstrate your interest in government work, and to make yourself known to government attorneys, is to work at an agency in your 1L or 2L summer, or do a semester externship.
 - Many federal summer positions are in Washington, D.C., but many agencies hire throughout the country
 - Some summer positions are paid ([US DOJ SLIP Program](#)), but many are not.
 - The externship application process can be less competitive than the entry-level application process, and working in the Federal Government during law school can help make your entry-level application float to the top of the pile.
 - Honors Program positions most often go to students who previously externed or interned for that agency.

Getting a Federal Attorney Position:

Step 1: Explore PSJD.org and click on “Resource Center” and look at the “Government Careers” resources. There are also resources for students seeking state or local employment. Read the Federal Legal Employment Opportunities Guide on PSJD.org for many helpful tips.

Step 2: Find a Position

- [Government Honors and Internship Handbook](#) – This is the most comprehensive resource for summer internships and Honors Programs, both for the Federal Government, and for some state and local agencies. (Obtain password from CPDC.)
 - From the “Table of Contents,” you can see a list of agencies in alphabetical order that have positions listed.
 - Honors Programs often have “Honors” or “Fellowships” or “3Ls, JLCs, LLMs, or Recent Grads” in the title.
 - Table 4 lists the positions for 3Ls in order of their deadlines.
 - Look for positions that are “Paid” and “Post-Grad” to find the Honors Programs.
 - Extensive information about the [DOJ Attorney General’s Honors Program](#) can be found at their website, including application tips, a checklist, practice areas, and DOJ Components that participate in their Honors Program.
- [USAJobs.gov](#) – This is the official job site for the United States Government and most federal job openings are posted here, however because attorney positions are “excepted,” many direct hiring positions are not posted. Honors Program positions are not posted on this website.
 - You can narrow your search using the “Advanced Search” feature.
 - Search for positions with a “Pay Grade (GS)” of 9, 10, or 11, which is what entry-level attorneys usually earn.
 - Search for positions with an “Occupational Series” of:

- 0905 – General Attorney
- 1222 – Patent Attorney
- Other Occupational Series that are quasi-legal include:
 - 1102 – Contract Specialist
 - 0991 – Claims Examining, Worker’s Compensation
 - 0963 – Legal Instruments Examiner
 - 0962 – Contract Specialist
 - 0986 – Legal Assistant
 - 0935 – Administrative Law Judge
 - 0900 – All Legal and Kindred Group postings
- The [OMP Handbook of Occupational Groups](#) can help you find other federal positions where your JD might be valued.
- You can also specify location, agency, etc.
- Positions that are open to recent graduates who are not yet members of a state bar will include wording similar to the following, however you will likely be competing against people who are already licensed to practice for these positions.
 - “Recent graduates that plan to take the bar within the current year may be considered for a FG/GS-11 law clerk position and may transition into an attorney position after being admitted to practice before the bar of any U.S. jurisdiction or the District of Columbia.”
- [Avue](#)– This website can be used as an alternative to USAJobs.gov; it is often more user friendly.
- [United States Government Manual](#) – This manual provides comprehensive information about all of the departments and their component agencies and can be used to help narrow down which agencies you are interested in working for.
- Agency Websites – Check individual agency websites often to see if an agency you are interested in is hiring, since most agencies do not post attorney positions on USAJobs.gov.
 - Attorney hiring is often listed within the agency’s general counsel page, but alternatively it could be within the inspector general or solicitor general of the agency.
 - Organizational charts can be useful to figure out where attorneys fit within the agency.
 - You might find that an agency has a hiring program for entry-level attorneys not listed in the Government Honors and Internship Handbook.

Step 3: Apply

- Many Honors Programs and USAJobs.gov postings will have online applications, but some agencies request submission of application materials by either mail or email.
- Check the agency’s website, in addition to the job posting, for required materials and tips for completing their application. Remember, every agency is different.

- It is essential to proofread your materials impeccably because most agencies get hundreds of applications per available position.
- For online applications, make sure to save your progress often and use the full extent of narrative text boxes. Check the required materials so that you have everything you need before you start the online application.
- Your agency contacts can help you figure out how to tailor your application materials (cover letter, resume, and writing sample) to the particular agency.
- Use your cover letter to make an explicit connection from your previous experience to the work attorneys do at the agency.
- Commit to a narrative: Tell the agency why you want to work for them specifically and why you want to do this kind of work. Tailor your resume to up your narrative.

Step 4: Interview

- Most initial interviews will be over the phone or on a video conference. The CPDC can help set up a video conference with you. You may have a second, in-person interview, either in Portland if the agency has a local office, or at their headquarters in Washington, D.C. The interviewee is expected to cover the cost of this travel.
- Check with the CPDC about potential funds to help defray the cost of interview travel.
- Several Lewis & Clark alumni currently working for the Federal Government chose to have their interviews in person in Washington, D.C., and said that even though it was expensive, they thought it helped them secure their jobs.
- Make sure you are familiar with the type of work that attorneys in the agency perform, and be familiar with what the agency is currently doing. See if the agency, or even the attorney interviewing you, has been in the news lately.
- Again, commit to a narrative. Be prepared to answer the question, “Why this agency?”