

# Federal Career Guide for Law Students



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## Why Federal Attorney Careers Matter

*Public service. Real impact. Career-defining experience.*

Federal legal positions are among the most selective and mission-driven roles in the legal profession. They offer early responsibility and substantive work, national scope and visibility, competitive [compensation and benefits](#), and the opportunity to make a lasting public service impact.

Attorneys serve in diverse roles across the federal government and work on many of the most significant legal and policy issues facing the nation. Federal attorneys regularly:

- Litigate high-impact cases in federal courts;
- Advise senior leaders and policymakers on legal strategy, regulatory decisions, and policy development;
- Negotiate complex national and international agreements;
- Investigate and prosecute significant federal crimes; and
- Shape legal frameworks that impact the nation as a whole.

This guide is designed to assist law students in navigating federal legal career pathways.

## Where do Federal Attorneys Work?

Federal attorney positions exist across the country—not just in Washington, D.C. Consider opportunities nationwide to expand your employment options or to identify a location that aligns with your professional and personal goals. In fact, positions outside of Washington, D.C. could offer new attorneys more responsibility and broader impact than comparable roles in Washington, D.C.

Federal attorneys work across the executive branch. While the Department of Justice employs more attorneys than any other agency, legal opportunities exist throughout the federal government. Seek out agencies that align with your interests, background, and desired impact.

## What Are the Most Common Legal Positions?

[USAJOBS - The Federal Government's official employment site](#) connects job seekers with federal job opportunities across the United States and around the world. Federal agencies use USAJOBS to post job openings and match qualified applicants to those jobs. USAJOBS serves as the central place to find opportunities in hundreds of federal agencies and organizations.

Law students and recent graduates can use USAJOBS.gov to search for attorney positions, internships, and other legal roles throughout the federal government.

Federal jobs are categorized by “job series” codes. Most federal attorney positions fall under the 0905 series. The 0999 series is commonly used for legal trainees and student intern positions. Not all legal positions require a law degree or membership in the American Bar Association (ABA) (e.g., legal assistant).

When searching on USAJOBS.gov, use keywords or the job series codes listed below. The job announcement indicates the qualifications and other eligibility requirements.

- 0905 – General Attorney
- 1222 – Patent Attorney
- 0999 – Legal Trainee (student intern)

Most common Non-Attorney Legal Support Positions:

- 0950 – Paralegal Specialist
- 0986 – Legal Assistance
- 0962 – Contact Representative

## **What Pay and Benefits Do Federal Attorneys Receive?**

Many federal legal internships are paid under the federal General Schedule (GS) system, with salaries adjusted based on location. Entry-level attorney positions are typically hired at the GS-11 or GS-12 level, depending on experience. For example, in the Washington, DC area, recent entry-level salaries have generally ranged from the mid-\$80,000s for new graduates to over \$100,000 for candidates with prior experience such as a judicial clerkship. Certain financial and independent agencies (e.g., Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Office of the Comptroller of the Currency) operate under separate pay systems and may offer higher starting salaries.

In addition to salary, federal employees receive comprehensive benefits such as health insurance, retirement contributions, paid leave, and potential eligibility for loan forgiveness or repayment programs. Benefit eligibility for interns varies based on the appointment type.

In addition to understanding compensation and benefits, students should familiarize themselves with the various pathways into federal legal service.

## **How to Find Federal Legal Job Opportunities**

Federal legal hiring generally falls into three categories:

- Internships (for current law students)
- Honors Attorney Programs (for recent graduates and clerks)
- Experienced Attorney Positions

Understanding which path applies to you will help you search strategically.

## **Suggested Timeline for Law Students**

### **First-Year Law Students (1L)**

- Explore agencies and practice areas of interest
- Apply for competitive summer internships
- Begin building relevant coursework and writing experience

### **Second-Year Law Students (2L)**

- Apply for competitive summer internships
- Monitor Honors Attorney Program announcements or set up a [USAJOBS Saved Search](#) (many open late summer)
- Continue strengthening research and litigation skills

### **Third-Year Law Students (3L)**

- Apply for Honors Attorney Programs
- Monitor entry-level attorney job opportunities or set up a [USAJOBS Saved Search](#)
- Prepare materials early for fall deadlines

## **I. Internships for Law Students**

Federal legal internships are designed for current law students (1Ls, 2Ls, and sometimes 3Ls) seeking summer or academic-year experience. Many summer internships open between July and September and/or between November and February for the following summer and may close quickly. Begin monitoring opportunities early in your 1L year.

### **A. Internships Posted on USAJOBS**

[USAJOBS](#) is the federal government’s official employment portal where agencies post job announcements and job seekers apply for positions. This is often the primary source for paid internships and volunteer opportunities.

To get started:

1. Create an account on [USAJOBS](#)
2. Use filters such as “internship” or “student”
3. Search using keywords or job series (e.g., 0905 or 0999)
4. Each job posting includes eligibility requirements, duties, application documents, deadlines, and contact information.

Read each job announcement carefully. Federal applications often require detailed documentation, transcripts, and responses to assessments. Failure to follow instructions may result in disqualification.

**Tip: Set up [saved searches and email alerts](#) in USAJOBS to be notified when new internships are posted.**

## **B. Agency-specific Law Intern Programs**

Examples of federal legal internship programs include:

- **Department of Justice (DOJ)-**
  - [Summer Law Intern Program \(SLIP\)](#)
  - [Volunteer Legal Internships – General Portal](#)
  - [Volunteer Legal Internship Openings](#)
  - **U.S. Attorneys’ Offices** - [U.S. Attorneys' Students Page](#)
- **Department of Labor (DOL) – Solicitor’s Office** - [SOL Internship and Externship Opportunities](#)
- **Department of State** - [U.S. Department of State Student Internship Program](#)
  - [Work Study \(Extern\) Program – Legal Adviser](#)
- **Department of the Treasury** - [Student Internships](#)
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):** [Office of General Counsel \(OGC\) Externships:](#)
- **Federal Reserve Board:** [Legal Division Summer Internships](#)
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** [Bureau of Competition Legal Internships](#)
- **Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC):** [SEC Scholars Program](#)

Examples of federal legal internships in the Intelligence Community include the following. These positions often require U.S. citizenship, extensive background investigations, and may involve longer hiring timelines due to security clearance requirements.

- **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Office of General Counsel**
  - [The General Counsel – CIA Official Page](#)
  - [Student Programs – CIA](#)
- **National Security Agency (NSA) Office of General Counsel**
  - [NSA Student Programs](#)
  - [NSA Students and Internships \(Intelligence Community Careers\)](#)

- **Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) Office of General Counsel**
  - [ODNI Student and Internship Programs](#)
  - [Legal Careers in the Intelligence Community Flyer \(PDF\)](#)
- **Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Office of General Counsel**
  - [Legal Careers – DIA](#)
  - [DIA Summer Internship Program \(SIP\)](#)
  - [DIA 2027 Summer Internship – OGC \(Sample Posting\)](#)

The programs listed above represent only a sample. Not all federal legal internships are posted on USAJOBS. While USAJOBS is the central employment portal for most federal positions, some agencies — particularly Offices of General Counsel — post internship and Honors opportunities only on their own websites and require direct application.

To maximize your chances, monitor both USAJOBS (or create a [Saved Search](#) in USAJOBS) and the career pages of agencies that interest you. Consider setting calendar reminders to check agency websites regularly during peak recruiting months (July–September and/or between November and February).

## II. Entry-Level Attorney Opportunities (Honors Programs)

Federal Honors Programs are prestigious, entry-level recruitment programs designed to hire outstanding recent law school graduates and judicial clerks into permanent careers. Most agencies call them “Honors Attorney Programs,” and each agency establishes its own eligibility requirements and application procedures.

Most Honors Programs:

- Open in late summer
- Close in early fall of a student’s final year
- Have agency-specific eligibility and application requirements

Refer to the Appendix and the Resources and Links section for a list of agencies offering this path to Federal service.

### What Makes a Strong Applicant for Entry-Level Positions?

- Strong legal research and writing skills
- Presentation and communication skills
- Soft skills and traits such as teamwork, time management, resilience, attention to detail
- Relevant coursework (e.g., administrative law, national security, procurement)
- Strong academic achievement
- Demonstrated interest in public service

### III. Experienced Attorney Positions

Experienced attorneys typically apply directly to agency career websites, agency job notifications, or jobs posted on USAJOBS.

These positions:

- May require specialized subject-matter expertise
- May require prior litigation or regulatory experience
- Often include additional documentation or writing samples requirements

Search using the 0905 – General Attorney job series on USAJOBS and review job postings carefully.

### What about positions not listed on USAJOBS?

Most federal attorney positions are posted on [USAJOBS](#). Search open attorney jobs across the United States by visiting the [Federal Attorney Job Portal](#). Some agencies, such as independent agencies or some Offices of General Counsel, may post attorney job opportunities, internships, or Honors Programs on their own websites rather than through USAJOBS. For example, explore the [Department of Justice's Programs for Law Students and Recent Graduates](#). These programs provide hands-on legal experience and a pathway to a federal attorney career.

Regardless of the platform used, federal attorney positions are publicly posted and follow established hiring procedures. Applicants should routinely check [USAJOBS](#) (or create a [Saved Search](#)) and agency-specific career pages to identify opportunities and review application instructions. Refer to the Appendix: List of Prominent Federal Honors Programs.

### What Are the Basic Requirements?

Requirements vary by position and are listed in the job announcement. Common requirements include:

- Be actively enrolled at least part-time in an accredited college or university
- Be a J.D. or LL.M. candidate in good standing at an ABA-accredited law school.
- Be a U.S. citizen or national.
- Submit a copy of transcripts (unofficial copies are accepted at the time of application). Some agencies may have a GPA requirement.
- Selective Service registration is required for male applicants unless exempt.
- Suitability for federal employment, as determined by background investigation. Some positions may require eligibility for a security clearance.

## Résumé and Application Tips

- Résumés submitted through USAJOBS must not exceed two pages.
  - Include detailed descriptions of duties and accomplishments.
  - For each relevant work experience, make sure you include job title and employer (including series and grade for any federal positions), start and end dates with month/year (e.g., 05/2019 – 08/2022), number of hours you worked per week.
  - Ensure work experience descriptions are aligned with the job announcement and address all required qualifications.
- Always follow the instructions in the specific job announcement. It includes information on qualifications for the opportunity.
- A writing sample, other assessments and/or interviews could be required.

## How Are Applicants Evaluated?

Applicants are evaluated based on academic performance, relevant coursework, legal experience, writing ability, and demonstrated interest in public service. Some positions require writing samples, structured interviews, or additional assessments. Be prepared to respond to assessment questions honestly and thoroughly.

## Attorney Recruiting Talent Networks

The Attorney Recruiting Talent Network allows students to sign up to receive opportunities and event notifications via email and enables federal recruiters to identify and engage them directly.

To join, click the link and follow prompts to create a USAJOBS account. Then, upload your 1 to 2-page résumé, and be sure to select the option to make your résumé searchable.

## Resources and Links

Learn more and take action

Start early, monitor opportunities regularly, and take advantage of available resources to position yourself for a career in federal service. Federal legal careers offer a unique opportunity to practice law at the highest levels of impact. With thoughtful planning and informed decision-making, you can pursue a rewarding career dedicated to public service. For more information, contact us at [pathways@opm.gov](mailto:pathways@opm.gov). Note that job seekers should contact the respective point of contact identified in the opportunity announcement for application questions and status updates requests.

## **OPM Attorney Talent Network**



Join the talent network and let federal recruiters find you. Enter your contact information, create your USAJOBS account, upload your 1 to 2-page résumé, and click the option to ‘make it searchable.’ You’ll also receive regular emails with opportunities and upcoming events.

## **OPM Attorney Recruiting Website**

Visit [talent.opm.gov/attorney](https://talent.opm.gov/attorney) to learn more about federal attorney hiring, see open internships and vacancies government-wide, and sign up for the Attorney Recruiting Talent Network. Search for jobs, read job descriptions, and find the opportunity that’s right for you.

## **Department of Justice Attorney Vacancies**

Visit [justice.gov/legal-careers/attorneys-vacancies](https://justice.gov/legal-careers/attorneys-vacancies) to view attorney and legal internship opportunities at Department of Justice. Filter by division/agency, by practice area, or by location. Learn about the application process for each and submit your application today.

## **OPM Attorney Recruiting Contact**

For questions and/or event requests, please email [outreach@opm.gov](mailto:outreach@opm.gov)

# Appendix. List of Prominent Federal Honors Programs

Application deadlines and eligibility requirements vary by agency. Refer to each agency's website for current information.

## Cabinet Departments

- **Department of Commerce:**
  - **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Attorney Honors Program:** [Attorney Honors Program – Overview](#) and [Attorney Honors Program – Apply](#)
- **Department of Defense/Department of War:**
  - **Office of General Counsel:** [Office of General Counsel > Careers](#)
  - **Department of the Army:** [Army General Counsel's Honors Program](#)
  - **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:** [Office of the Chief Counsel's Civilian Honors Attorney Program](#)
  - **National Security Agency (NSA):** [Office of the General Counsel Legal Honors Program](#)
- **Department of Energy (DOE):** [Honors Attorney Program](#)
- **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):** [HHS OGC Open Career Opportunities](#) and [Careers in the HHS OGC](#)
- **Department of Homeland Security (DHS):** [Secretary's Honors Program for Attorneys](#) and [FEMA Honors Attorney Program](#)
- **Department of Justice (DOJ):** [Attorney General's Honors Program](#)
- **Department of Labor (DOL):** [Attorney Honors Program](#)
- **Department of State:**
  - [Attorney-Advisers – Office of the Legal Adviser](#)
  - [Employment Opportunities – Legal Adviser](#)
- **Department of the Treasury:**
  - **Internal Revenue Service (IRS):** [IRS Careers - Honors Program for Entry-Level Attorneys](#)
  - **Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC):** [Honors Attorney Program](#) and [OCC Legal Careers](#)
  - **Treasury Office of the General Counsel –** [Honors Program](#)
- **Department of Transportation (DOT):** [Honors Attorney Program](#)

- **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of General Counsel:** [VA OGC Honors Program Official Page](#)
- **Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)** (*Independent agency often grouped with executive departments for hiring context*)
  - [Honors Fellowship Programs](#)
  - Region 5 (Chicago): [Honors Attorney Fellowships](#)
  - Region 10 (Seattle): [Honors Attorney Fellowships](#)

## Independent Agencies

- **Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB):** [CFPB Honors Attorney Program | Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#)
- **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC):** [Attorney Honors Program](#)
- **Federal Communications Commission (FCC):** [Attorney Honors Program](#)
- **Federal Trade Commission (FTC):** [FTC Honors Attorney Program: Cross-Bureau Entry-Level Opportunity](#)
- **Government Accountability Office (GAO):** [Summer Associate Legal Honors Program](#)
- **Library of Congress:** [Congressional Research Service \(CRS\) Honors Attorney Program](#)
- **National Labor Relations Board (NLRB):** [Honors Attorney Program](#)
- **Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC):** [Honor Law Graduate Program – Main Page](#)
- **Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC):** [Chair’s Attorney Honors Program](#)

## Financial Regulators

- **Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC):** [FDIC Legal Division Honors Attorney Program – Main Page](#)
- **Federal Reserve Board:** [Legal Division Honors Program](#)
- **Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC):** [Honors Attorney Program](#) and [OCC Legal Careers](#)



## **U.S. Office of Personnel Management**

Workforce Policy and Innovation (WPI)  
1900 E Street NW, Washington DC 20415

[OPM.gov](https://www.opm.gov)