



For Love or Money: Does It Pay to Work in the Public Sector?

By Mandy Willingham

It's a dilemma that can strike at the heart (and pocketbook) of any legal professional who is considering working in the public sector: Do the benefits of following a more altruistic career path outweigh the potential downsides of earning less than those in private practice? Besides income, what are the other important factors to weigh before deciding between these two markedly different professional worlds?

Whether you're interested in serving as a public defender or working in the U.S. Attorney's Office, it pays to do thorough research on the job descriptions, salaries, and benefits provided to professionals in the public sector. Fortunately, there are many resources to help you make the best decision regarding a possible legal career with the government.

For those considering jobs as Assistant U.S. Attorneys, the website for the [U.S. Department of Justice](#) offers a thorough description of the application and interview process, as well as AUSA training programs and assignments. The site also lists specific contact information for questions about salaries and benefits for AUSAs.

On a more regional level, many counties throughout the country list their available public-sector positions, including detailed job descriptions and salary ranges, online and on designated employment hotlines. For example, the Department of Human Resources Job Opportunities website for Los Angeles County lists such available positions as Deputy Public Defender and includes monthly salary ranges for interested applicants.

If you're seeking in-person advice, the career services office at your law school can help you identify the kinds of public-sector jobs that best match your interests, goals, and income requirements. Many career services offices have extensive websites with statistics on employment opportunities and salaries for attorneys in various private- and public-sector jobs.

Other valuable sources of information on legal jobs in the public sector are sites like [LawCrossing](#). This online job board for legal professionals features available jobs in the public sector from across the U.S. And, depending on the department or agency posting the vacancy, these listings may also provide salary ranges in addition to job requirements.

Of course, nothing replaces good firsthand knowledge and experience. Attorneys working in the public or private sector can offer valuable insights on the advantages and difficulties found in each of these fields. In fact, you may obtain the most helpful inside knowledge from colleagues, acquaintances, or former classmates.

Finally, take some time to compare your specific career goals and needs with the common aspects of public-sector work. Undoubtedly, salaries for attorneys working for federal, state, and local governments may be notably lower than those of attorneys in private practice. However, the level of job security is frequently much higher in the public sector. Also, the public sector often encourages networking among employees of various departments and organizations, presenting unique opportunities that may not be as readily available in the private sector. In addition, the skills and experiences obtained through work in the public sector can be both applicable to and sought by many employers in the private sector.