



CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SERVICE JOBS IN EVERY SECTOR AND FOR EVERY MISSION

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” —Barack Obama

The U.S. economy has several different sectors that serve different functions and operate in different ways. In order to provide some perspective about what public service opportunities are available in the United States, the first part of this chapter defines the scope of these different parts of the economy and what each does to benefit the public good.

In addition, while other chapters of this book focus on jobs that are specific to particular issue areas, certain types of public service jobs are found in nearly all non-profit and government agencies. The second half of this chapter covers these jobs in more detail.

Where Are the Public Service Jobs?

Public service jobs are available in multiple parts of the U.S. economy: the public sector, the nonprofit sector, and even the private sector. The following sections describe each of these sectors and explain the benefits and drawbacks of working in them.

The Public Sector

The public sector is another term for government—city, county, municipal, state, federal, and even international government. Public sector organizations are generally funded by taxes, which only the government has the power to levy.

These organizations and agencies provide more jobs than you might think—about 16 percent of jobs in the United States, or a total of about 22 million people in 2006. The federal government employed about 2.7 million civilian employees as of 2007 and is the nation’s largest single employer. (Note that this number doesn’t include the millions of jobs in the private sector that are dependent on federal government contracts.) Local government employees numbered more than 14 million, and state governments employed more than 5 million people in 2006.

Governments provide many benefits that people take for granted. Things such as public education, parks, clean water, insured bank deposits, transportation and transit, libraries, electrical utilities, public safety, national security, international diplomacy, the legal system, and protections for public resources such as clean air or water are provided either solely or mainly by government. Table 2.1 provides a snapshot of overall government employment (federal, state, and local combined) in the United States.

Table 2.1: Total Government Employment by Function

Function	Percent of Total Government Employment	Number of Jobs
Education and research	53%	11,800,000
Security, defense, law enforcement, and judicial system	12%	2,800,000
Health	8%	1,780,000
Infrastructure, utilities, and transportation	7%	1,400,000
Other	6%	1,200,000

Function	Percent of Total Government Employment	Number of Jobs
Environment and parks	4%	800,000
Postal service	4%	770,000
Human services	3%	696,000
Community/economic development, trade, finance, and government finance	3%	687,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 data.

There are three points to consider about government jobs:

- Government exists at the federal (national), state, and local/municipal levels.
- Government is divided into three branches: executive (for example, the President, a state governor, a mayor, and the many agencies reporting to them), legislative (the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, a state legislature, or the city or county council), and judicial (the Supreme Court and other courts and judges).
- Some government positions are elected or appointed, and others are considered *civil service* positions.

The next several sections provide an overview of the levels and branches of government so that you can get a sense of which does what—and how you can be a part of it.

The Federal Government

The federal government is nationwide and covers a vast array of agencies and career opportunities. Employees at federal agencies serve as diplomats to other countries, protect food safety through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), provide assistance for low-income individuals through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, produce important information for the public through agencies such as the National Weather Service, and research diseases through the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and National Institutes of Health (NIH). They also manage records for the National Archives and provide burials for military veterans through the National Cemetery Administration. Although one out of nine federal government employees works in Washington, DC (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics), the majority work in all of the 50 states and internationally.