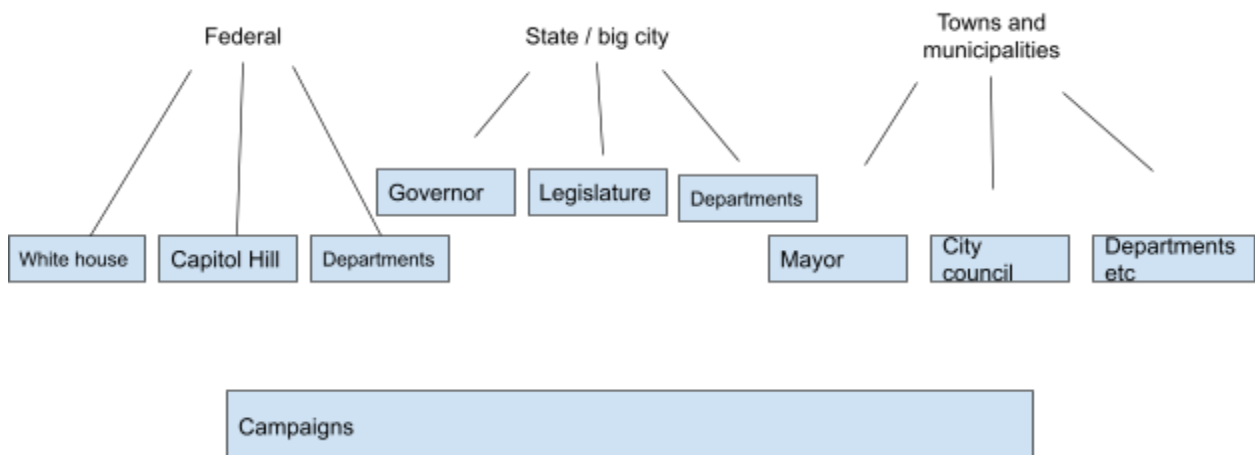


So you want to work in Local Government?

If you're interested in meaningful direct impact work, you might not need to look further than your own community. Working for local government, whether in your hometown or a town you plan to call home, provides vast and unique opportunities. You learn the inner workings of your county or city and develop an intimate understanding of how government stuff really works. Working in local government gives you the chance to invest in your community and see tangible results of your work, often in real time.

Issues such as increasing access to broadband, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and implementing diversity and equity community strategies can (and should!) all happen at the higher levels of government (federal/state), but these government bodies are often slower to act and implement these policies and practices than local entities. Local government's "real and raw" nature is also appealing to many, thanks to the ease of making connections "across the aisle," and lack of significant lobbying influence or media attention in this sphere. Within local government jobs, there are a wide range of entry-level responsibilities, hiring practices, hours and pay, which largely depend on the geographic location and size of the municipality/county. If this career path sounds exciting to you, this guide will take you through everything you need to know about working in Housing.

To inform our work, Second Day has spoken to experts in the field and gathered the best information out there for upcoming graduates and recent graduates. First, the guide will take you through the different entry-level positions to look out for in this field. Then, we'll provide tips on actually getting those jobs in Local government. We'll finish with our next three steps: actionable items you can take to make progress towards finding your first job in Local government. Let's get started! Mayor 2030, here we come!



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What types of roles exist in local government?

There are a variety of roles you can pursue as you begin your career in local government, and a range of avenues to get there. While [Engaging Local Government Leaders](#) and [PublicServiceCareers.org](#) have stepped up to aggregate job listings from around the country, most jobs are posted on discreet department webpages (which can be frustratingly challenging to navigate). If you want to work in policy long term, it's good to keep an open mind to lower level admin roles and be willing to work your way up! The line between constituency and administrative work can often be blurred, and there's far less specialization within roles at the beginning. Below, we've outlined some of the most common roles in government, but a common theme we will mention throughout this guide is that exact roles and titles vary by geography and so it is important to apply this guide in the context of your local community.

Topic analyst roles (Policy Analyst/Assistant to X): This can look like working in the city manager's office helping with operations (general skills), or working in the community development department as a housing policy analyst (topic specific).

Young people are particularly well suited for fundraising and grant-related roles, as this area is frequently in-demand in local government. Sometimes this involves handling large federal or state grants, while other times it involves seeking grants from local foundations. If you have a strong interest in policy research, there will often be opportunities for recent graduates on topics such as environmental sustainability, housing, workforce development, and public health. Generally, it is important to have some sort of academic or internship experience here that is relevant to the position and proves that you will be able to do the job. These roles typically have the word "Analyst" attached to job titles, or are assistant positions (Assistant to Deputy City Manager, etc).

Project Coordinators/Managers: While policy analysts are conducting research on city policy, project coordinators are managing how a city's money is used. They design interventions, write contracts, identify partners to run projects, and then manage those partners. This is a hands on form of grants administration. Depending on when you join the team, you could be strategizing about a future project, designing the initiative, selecting the contractor, writing/negotiating the contracts, managing the contract, or closing the project. As a result, these roles can be an exciting look into the "lifecycle" of a city-funded project, and your day to day job could change immensely month to month.

One month you could be negotiating with a venture capital firm about launching a business accelerator in your city, the next month you could be writing talking points for the mayor about the accelerator's opening, the next month you could be speaking to a class of high schoolers about how they can get internships at the accelerator. If you are looking at a smaller

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town or a more rural community, you have a higher chance of getting this type of role, as larger cities often require several years of work experience or a masters degree (usually a Masters in Public Policy) to get hired. The City of Los Angeles has a budget double the size of the Gates Foundation's annual giving, and there are often opportunities for junior employees to have a significant role in determining how that money is dispersed.

Legislative aides: The core staff for city councillors, county commissioners, or state representatives/senators. Legislative aids typically handle three core roles: communications support, engaging with constituents, and developing new policy/legislation. You will work quite closely with your elected representative and get a deep understanding of the city, city government, and most elected officials. Taking this role for a year or two positions you quite well to pivot into a specific committee or department in government that aligns even more closely with your interests.

Communications: This is another great entry point. Communications staff usually work for an elected representative or support a government department in their communications department. For larger staffs, some roles will just focus on communications (newsletters, graphic design, social media), while other roles will also include constituent engagement, policy development, or other necessary roles.

Boards/Commissions: Every city across the country has "boards" and "commissions," such as planning and zoning commissions, parks and recreation boards (hey Pawnee, Indiana!), sustainability task forces, universal broadband commissions, you name it. While the specific entities vary based on each municipality's specific priorities, it is worth exploring what options in your area are exciting to you. **Many boards and commissions offer volunteer opportunities, and these can be excellent ways to get your foot in the door of local government.** If you're not ready to take on a serious volunteer role (such as Community Board Events Coordinator), you can often sit in on the meetings of these entities anyway. Most meetings are open to the public, and attending your community board or other commission meetings is one way to demonstrate your commitment to your community on a job application. Some boards and commissions even have a staff or team supporting their work if they are large enough.

Layers of city government

Researching the different branches of city and state government and how they are structured based on the location you have selected will allow you to better envision what is a good fit for you. This is a required first step! Think about whether you want to work on the city council, within a department such as transportation or housing, or on the staff of an elected official. In general, you can sort a community into three main groups:

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Smaller towns and cities: These areas will often be governed by a more administrative mayor or even a town manager (someone hired, rather than elected). If there are city councilors, they will rarely have full-time staff and oftentimes work other full-time jobs. Some of the most promising opportunities in these areas can be with county-level or region-level initiatives or boards, where there are enough resources to bring someone on full-time. (Less than 50,000 people)

Medium-sized cities: These cities are the most variable in size and structure. Some have strong mayors that are elected, while others have stronger councils with appointed administrators. As a general rule of thumb, the more elected officials are on a board, the fewer staff they may hire. For instance, a decent-sized city with 6 council members will likely have a staff for each member, whereas the same sized city with 40 aldermen might not have any staff at all. This same rule applies for state legislators - California only has 40 state senators for about 40 million people while New Hampshire has 400 state representatives for only 1.4 million people.

Large cities: These cities often have a strong mayor and city council, with lots of opportunities to get involved. Because of the sheer size of these cities (Philadelphia budget of \$4.5B, Cleveland budget of \$1.8B, New York City Budget \$88B), there are always opportunities to work and so the focus is to find the right fit for you. There are certainly administrative roles with the city government itself and often political roles with city councillors as well. (300,000+ people)

For most entry-level positions (in any industry), there will often be a fair amount of grunt work, so it's important not to get discouraged by the tactical needs of these positions. Remember, **government is often slow for a reason**. Using taxpayer funds in a democracy means that you need to be very careful about how funds are spent. This slowness can sometimes be infuriating, but it can also provide serious opportunities if you can figure out how to work within these systems and get money to the causes that are critical for an equitable society. As opposed to state and federal politics, many local governments are less driven by partisan politics. Different teams or departments also have quite different cultures or requirements, so it is important to ask questions during the interview process to understand how things work.

Local government by the numbers: (pay and hours)

Salaries: These range widely based on where in the country you are working. Though you shouldn't expect to get rich working in local government, government employees typically receive a good benefits package and stable salaries. Smaller cities will provide smaller salaries accordingly, but your costs of living will also be lower working in Des Moines versus New York City. If your position is a political appointment, your salary will also depend on the

administration, with a lower range of \$40K. Many government salaries are public, so you can check them out as benchmarks as you evaluate jobs.¹

Hours: This will also depend greatly on whether you are in a political or career position. If the latter, hours are typically 9-5 and it's possible to be part of a union. If you're a political appointee, hours are often longer and there is more work to be done out of the office. There can be meetings at night and public events on the weekends. Roles that are more constituency-facing involve more events outside of work hours, but this is less true for policy analysts or roles in city hall/state legislatures. On the flip side, these roles are more attached to "crises" and you have to be available with a lot of flexibility.

How to get a job in local government/what's next

Location, Location, Location: Local government roles vary greatly depending on location, which means your search will have to be place-based. For this reason, it's best to **anchor yourself in a community you are familiar with**. This can be where you went to college, where you grew up, where you have family currently, or anywhere else where you have a personal connection. This knowledge will allow you to network more effectively and will allow you to stand out as an applicant because of your personal ties to the place. If you harbor dreams of working somewhere where you have no personal connection, it will likely be tougher to get your foot in the door, but not impossible with the right networking. It can also be helpful to think about where you want to work from a resource lens, given that larger states and cities have more money to implement creative, quick interventions. There are pros and cons to this, but the size of the place, demographics, and priorities of leadership will dictate your life and what resources you have to do your work.

Networking: Postings are generally circulated internally or through local news outreach sources rather than traditional job boards. Therefore, **networking is crucial in this sector**. It will allow you to figure out what opportunities are even available, and the smaller the town you are looking at, the more critical it is that you are connected with people currently engaged in local government. Once again, different regions have different organizational structures, so doing in-depth research on the municipality's governing structure and conducting informational interviews while you're still early in the job search will help you identify what approach is best for you. If you have no idea where to begin, find anyone involved in local politics--a reporter, a professor, a staff aid, a volunteer, organizer, or business person. If you start asking questions about different committees, boards, and power structures in the city, that first person can often help connect

¹ [SeeThroughNY](#) is an example of a New York specific resource; take some time to browse public salaries for the locations you're interested in. [Iowa Salary Book](#) or [St. Louis Salaries](#) are other examples. A simple google search for 'location + public salaries' should surface a resource in most cases.

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you with other people in the community. Don't be afraid to ask dumb questions at first--most people don't understand how local government actually works in their community.

Networking can also involve attending town meetings, cross cultural committees, and whatever else the community in question does to publicly engage constituents. Show up and learn about what's going on, what projects are priorities, and who to connect with. These meetings can be a bit boring, so it is a gathering spot for those most engaged in politics in your community. Local elected officials, engaged citizens, and other influential community members come to these meetings and are very eager to meet young people passionate about community change. **Making yourself known as someone who cares about the community will help you go far.**

Focus on a Specific Field: If you are really passionate about a particular topic area, like sustainability or housing, that can be a great way to differentiate and market yourself when applying to jobs. Having that sort of focus is not necessary, however. Many government employees are generalists and/or have a skill-focused role. Depending on where you want to work, your interests and the skills you bring accordingly can vary in importance. If you want to work at your city's Department of Transportation, for example, it would be great to care a lot about transit and people who bring more nuanced skills and experiences will stand out.

Pathways to get your foot in the door

Internships: The easiest way to get a job in local government jobs is to take an internship with a department or elected official that you want to work with. Outside of the biggest state legislators or committees, there is **rarely a formal internship program**. That means that if you send an email to that legislator asking to get more involved, they are often delighted to have you. If you can come into the office 2 days per week (8-12 hours per week), that is enough time to make an impact. Doing this type of internship is the easiest way to get to know the local political landscape and land a full-time role after graduation. Be warned, though, that while it is possible to pitch paid work, many local government roles do not pay their interns (though "[Pay Our Interns](#)" is working to change that!).

There are also **college/university programs** (so check with your school and career office) that pair you with local government offices and sometimes offer stipends or support during your placement. Usually, you will begin as an intern and can move up with experience and time committed. Universities can also provide opportunities to network with your state representative(s) or mayor's office.

Volunteering or working on a local campaign: While national and state-wide campaigns have hundreds of staff members, many local campaigns have small teams. A city council, state representative, or mayoral candidate might have only a couple full-time staff. This means that they will notice and appreciate it if you sign up to help them make phone calls, knock on doors,

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or help out their campaign in any way. This experience will provide great exposure to the candidate and a lot of other engaged citizens and staff in the city. Those people can serve as a great network to help you find a full-time role working in government once you graduate!

Fellowships: Two reputable fellowships are [Lead for America](#) (focused on municipal and county governments) and [Govern for America](#) (focused on state governments). Both are great programs that provide opportunities for upward mobility and training structures that might not typically exist in government roles otherwise. Many states and larger cities also have fellowship programs that could be interesting points of entry (for example, [NYC Urban Fellows](#) or [Florida Gubernatorial Fellows](#)).

Importantly, government work is intersectional work. Government cannot function without engaging with a variety of different stakeholders, and some of those stakeholders are entirely focused on working with governments. The following are job opportunities that will intersect with local government and provide a pathway and connections to future roles in local government (ways to get your foot in the door)

- **Nonprofits** working in the community you're interested in, particularly community hubs like the United Way or organizations that focus on lobbying for policy change. They often work closely with local government and other relevant actors and can provide a unique way in. You'll be building a local network by gaining an internship or work experience at a small nonprofit.
- **Media and news groups** can provide unique opportunities to network with local leaders. Internships, freelance, or entry-level positions can all provide opportunities to get engaged with local issues and to help inform the public.
- **Regional planning/economic development corporations/business networks** work with different levels of government and local businesses. While these organizations are often government agencies themselves, this varies location by location. Organizations like "The Partnership for NYC" or "Tech:NYC" are examples of nonprofit groups who rally the business community to be engaged in local politics. These organizations can be extremely powerful influencers of political agendas, and working for them will give you connections with both the business and political communities.
- **Philanthropists** often have a strong local focus. They are in touch with community needs and fund programs that are vital to the community. If you get a job with a community foundation or locally-focused philanthropist, that is a great way to understand both the public and social sector. To learn more about working at a foundation, check out our career guide [here](#):
- **Community organizing (Issue-based, Tenant, or Union organizing)** involves advocating for your community, and will help you get a close look at what works and what doesn't in your local government. You will likely engage directly with local government officials, and you will learn the in's and out's of "the system," usually with an emphasis on how the

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system is failing certain communities. To learn more about working in community organizing, check out our career guide [here](#):

- **Entrepreneurship** is good if you are business-minded and have ideas to pitch locally, this can be a good route for you. This could include starting your own business or working for a local startup. If it has a local focus, running or working for a small business can be a great way to get plugged into a local community.

Be prepared to pitch your skills! Many of these smaller local groups have less frequent hiring cycles and so there may be an opportunity for you to carve out a role at one of these organizations through informational interviews and a clear personal narrative. The specific skills will vary widely by the organization you are applying for and the role you want, but for all of them, a deep knowledge of the local community is helpful.

Exit Opportunities

The skills and responsibilities you gain in local government can often outshine those of a private sector entry-level employee if you are clear in your narrative and quantifying your accomplishments. For example, you might be helping to shape billion dollar government budgets only a year or two out of school. By now, you know that local government is complicated and nuanced, so you cannot assume someone will understand the depths of your role from a simple job title. Instead, it is critical to clearly translate the skills you built and responsibility you had in a digestible way for employers from other sectors. Working for a few years in city government can position you exceptionally well for any roles in public service. But if you realize government isn't your thing, these roles can also position you to transition to work for a nonprofit, the private sector, or even position you to run for office yourself. Remember that government touches everything. You can use your time in government to both assess what sectors have the most impact in your community, and gain the connections and experience you need to leap to that sector. While positioning your experience and talking to a range of folks about next steps is necessary in any industry, it is more important here than most anywhere else to set yourself up for a great exit opportunity from your first job.

Next Three Steps

1. Identify a community or two where you want to live. Let's get (virtually) embedded in there now!
2. Talk to people in your communities who are working in local government to understand how it is structured, what opportunities exist, and where you might fit in. Begin establishing yourself in your community by attending events or volunteering. If you are really serious about this work, developing some specialized knowledge would be a huge

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asset. Taking undergrad classes on transit and housing policy, for example, or finding outside opportunities to learn about specific focus areas will really aid your work.

3. Get your foot in the door by interning, volunteering, working on a campaign, or through an adjacent industry. There is often room to work your way up once you are in a position!

Would you recommend this guide to a friend? Let us know! Use [this link](#) to give us your feedback.

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