ESAL

Engineers & Scientists Acting Locally

Playbook Guide - ESAL Playbook - Build your career in state or local government

Purpose

- Provide tips and resources to prepare you to apply for local government jobs
- Highlight job boards and networks that are helpful during job searches
- Connect ESAL resources and case studies that expand conceptions of local roles people with STEM backgrounds play

Ideal Outcomes

- Identify steps to prepare for applying for local government jobs
- Discover a range of local government job opportunities fitting for people with backgrounds in STEM
- Start or continue a career in civil service with state and local governments

Finding Purpose in Local Government Work

Landing a job in local government can be a rewarding path for people who are interested in a career in policy or public service. According to the U.S. census, there are over 90,000 different local government organizations in the U.S., including states, counties, municipalities, school districts, special districts and townships. As a local government employee, you can help inform and enact policy decisions within these organizations, and can contribute to public programs that have a huge impact on people's' everyday lives. Scientists and engineers are often strong candidates for positions in state and local government, bringing not just deep expertise, but also skills in analyzing and synthesizing information, managing multi level projects, and communicating complex content to a variety of audiences.

Preparing to Apply

Many state and local governments are organized similarly to the federal government structures. Before you apply, though, consider reviewing ESAL's Civics 101 highlighting basics of local governments. Research some of the current work your local governments are implementing and follow work that interests you.

If you do not see an opportunity that directly aligns with your interests but want to stay informed about openings with governments, consider researching your state or municipality's civil service exam. By taking the exam, what opportunities open up for you? People who take and pass these exams and placed onto civil service lists, which make you eligible for various openings in local governments.

Review and update your CV or resume to align with what your government is seeking. Once you identify an opportunity, review the tasks listed in the job description, identify your relevant skills and experiences, and feature them in a concise resume.

Related, customize your cover letter to explain how your STEM training uniquely prepares you for filling a specific role with your local government.

When you can, seek another opinion. Ask a colleague to review the job description and your application materials together.

Exploring State Fellowships

Fellowships are one option for launching a career in public service. Local science and technology policy fellowships typically place scientists and engineers in legislative committees, policymaker's offices, executive branch departments, or governmental advisory bodies to work as expert staff. For more information check out the following resources:

- ESAL Playbook: Apply for a Local Policy Fellowship (a step-by-step guide)
- National Conference of State Legislature's list of active state fellowship programs

Applying for a Job

As a scientist or engineer, you already have a wealth of skills and expertise that you can leverage to apply directly to jobs in state and local government. Start by exploring what opportunities are out there that match your interests and experience. Places to look include:

- **Your state, county, or city website**, of which there are too many to list because each state and local government often recruits through their own job platforms
- **Public service job platforms**, such as GovernmentJobs.com, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), or Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL)
- **Job sites that are tailored to current and former federal civil servants and campaign staff**, such as Civic Match
- **Job sites that focus on specific scientific or technical areas,** such as Climate Change Jobs, Data Jobs, or the Public Health Employment Connection

Find additional local organizations and STEM professionals with whom you might network on ESAL's Local STEM Database and Local Engagement Map.

Additional Job Resources

For additional advice on finding and applying to jobs, and transitioning to a career in science policy or public service, see:

- "Getting Into Local Government: How to Earn a Public Role and What to Expect" by GovPilot (Article)
- "Scientists Needed: Using Your STEM Skills in Local Government" by Engineers and Scientists Acting Locally

For more inspiration, check out the blog articles below, which feature a variety of people with backgrounds in STEM who have built their careers in state or local government.

Last Updated:
Published: 02/28/25