



Unlocking Public Sector Careers

A State Government Application Guide for STARs



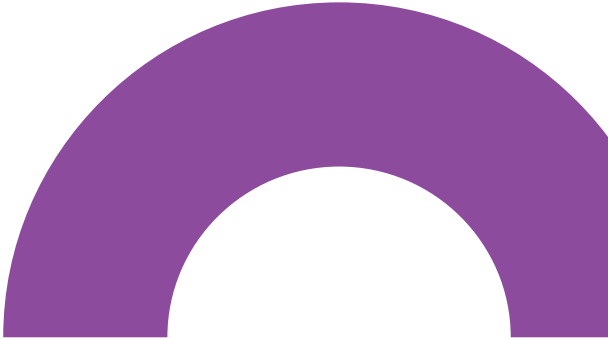
Opportunity
@Work.

STARs
SKILLED THROUGH
ALTERNATIVE ROUTES.

SKILLUP

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Acknowledgements

We extend our deepest gratitude to the dedicated public servants who shared their stories and participated in our listening sessions to inform our State Government Application Guide for STARs. Their invaluable insights, candid feedback, and real-world expertise were instrumental in shaping this resource.

By sharing their unique perspectives—drawn from various roles, agencies, and levels of government—they helped ensure this guide is a practical, relevant, and actionable tool to support STARs in their journeys to exploring and applying to state government jobs.

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Special thanks to the team at Opportunity@Work who helped bring this project to completion including Blair Corcoran de Castillo, Scott Gullick, Natalia Lara, and Jalencia Wade and the team at SkillUp including Mariangeles Chinelatto, Desiree Jewell, Erin Ravenscraft, and Elissa Salas. Thanks to Amy Mortimer and Kati Landucci for your review.

Foreword

The Government Needs You: A Skills-Based Future

For too long, the American workforce has been divided by a “[paper ceiling](#)”—an invisible barrier that has blocked millions of talented workers from upward mobility simply because they do not have a bachelor’s degree. This system doesn’t just hurt workers; it hurts our public institutions. By filtering out candidates based on degree requirements rather than demonstration of knowledge, skills, and abilities, our government agencies miss out on a massive pool of talent: the over **70 million workers** in the U.S. who are [Skilled Through Alternative Routes \(STARs\)](#) instead of a bachelor’s degree.

But the landscape is changing. A movement is underway to rewire the labor market. From the federal government to state houses and city halls across the country, leaders are recognizing that if you have the skills to do the job, you should be able to compete for the job. Beginning in 2020, [federal, state, and local governments have been tearing the paper ceiling](#) to build an agile and responsive government that taps into all of the talent across communities, and in turn, truly reflects the public it serves.

For STARs, this guide is more than just a set of recommendations; it is an invitation. Your skills—gained through military service, community college, workforce training, or hard-earned experience on the job—are valid, valuable, and sought after. Every level of government needs your problem-solving abilities, your adaptability, and your diverse perspectives to deliver critical services and provide operational stability.

As you turn these pages, know that you are part of a community of millions, including the nearly 9 million STARs who work in federal, state and local government.¹ You are a STAR, and it is time for your skills to shine.



Introduction

Welcome to the beginning of an exciting journey in public service!

Our federal, state, and local government agencies are dedicated to serving communities and making a positive impact—and they need your help to do it. Government jobs are varied—and go beyond what most people realize. In fact, public sector career opportunities contain the breadth of opportunities that exist in the private sector. For example, you can find jobs in many different industries, like HR, IT, Finance, Operations, STEM, law enforcement, healthcare, and more! As a STAR, your practical knowledge, problem-solving abilities, and skills built through alternative routes are likely well aligned with roles in the public sector. Often, the biggest challenge for anyone interested in joining the government is finding and landing the roles. Good news! That's what this guide is designed to do: help you find, apply and land a job in the public sector.

Consider this guide as your roadmap. It is designed to help you navigate the unique aspects of public sector hiring, translate your experience into language hiring managers understand, and approach the application process with confidence. While there are similarities across different levels of government, there are also differences. **This guide is largely an introduction to state government talent practices.**

The Public Sector Has Opportunities for STARs

Public sector leaders are waking up to a simple truth: the economy does not work unless it works for STARs. To meet their hiring needs and better serve their constituents, the public sector is shifting its focus from degrees as the key measure of value in the labor market to skills.

More than 30 state governments have taken action—through executive orders and legislation—to remove unnecessary degree requirements that create barriers for public sector employment and to transform their talent systems to be based on skills. This commitment ensures that government agencies hire and advance workers based on the skills they have, not where they gained them. This shift has opened the door for STARs to compete for the same roles as workers with a bachelor's degree, with the potential to unlock access to over 741,000 good jobs.²

This Guide Offers Advice from the Experts

Opportunity@Work co-designed this guide with SkillUp, utilizing the knowledge gained from working with public sector leaders through the STARs Public Sector Hub, and the participation of three states: **Arizona, California, and Colorado**. We interviewed HR professionals and hiring managers spearheading skills-based talent practices in these states to learn exactly how their processes work, what they look for in top candidates, and what advice they would give to STARs. In the pages that follow, we share their direct advice and best practices recommended to help you succeed at every stage of the hiring process—from your first search to your first day on the job.

Please note that throughout this guide, we use the terms “public sector” and “government” interchangeably. The public sector refers to all jobs within federal, state, or local governments. It is important to note that hiring processes may look different within the public sector depending on whether you are applying for a role in federal, state, or local government. Always be sure to refer to the guidance provided by the government entity to which the job reports. Our goal is to provide general guidance to help you navigate these systems and point you toward additional resources where you can find more specific guidance tailored for the level of government and location for which you seek to apply.

To learn more about other state government processes, or to explore resources for applying to federal and local government jobs, please refer to the **Additional Tools & Resources** section located in the **Appendix**.

Understanding the Public Sector Hiring Process

What makes the public sector hiring process different?

Public sector hiring differs from the private sector hiring process in a few key ways. The public sector hiring process typically follows standardized, merit-based systems designed to ensure fair and equal opportunity for all applicants. Therefore, the public sector application process is very structured.

Unlike the private sector, which may skip or re-order certain steps to fast track an applicant, government agencies must follow a specific review process and vetting system. This is largely why it can take several months to land a public sector job, even for an entry-level position. According to research by NEOGOV, the average time to hire in the public sector is 119 days; whereas, the average time to hire in the private sector is 36 days.³

While the public sector hiring process can be lengthy, there is a concerted effort⁴ within the public sector to improve their hiring processes so applicants like you and constituents can benefit. For example, Arizona, one of the three states participating in Opportunity@Work and SkillUp's Public Sector Hiring Pilot, has reduced their time to hire to 45 days.

Commonly Used Terms within Public Sector Hiring

Classification System

A structured, hierarchical framework used to organize jobs into classes or pay grades based on job evaluation criteria, including the minimum qualifications and requirements that must be met to be considered qualified for a position.

Class or Class of Positions

Class refers to all positions that are sufficiently similar in (1) kind or subject matter of work, (2) the level of difficulty and responsibility, and (3) the qualification requirements for the work, to warrant similar treatment in personnel and pay administration.

Class Specification

A written definition of a job class. A class specification generally includes the class title, specification code number, factors distinguishing class level, typical duties, competency expectations, and minimum qualifications needed to be eligible for each position.

Minimum Qualifications

Qualifications that an applicant must possess, at a minimum, to be eligible for hire or promotion with the classification system. Applicants must demonstrate how they meet the minimum qualification requirements for the position, or they will not be considered for the position.

Preferred Qualifications

Additional experience, skills, knowledge, or abilities that are preferred for the position. Candidates should clearly explain in their applications how they meet preferred qualifications. Answer supplemental questions and attach supporting documentation including resumes, cover letters, work samples (when applicable) to demonstrate preferred qualifications. Demonstration of preferred qualifications helps candidates stand out and may determine which candidates are selected to move forward in the process.

Civil Service

The system state governments use to hire, manage, and promote employees for public sector jobs. It includes job classifications, application and hiring procedures, examinations (when required), and rules for pay, promotions, and discipline. Civil service systems are designed to create a structured and consistent hiring process across agencies.

Civil Service Examination

A merit-based assessment used to evaluate applicants for a public sector position that commonly cover reading, math, reasoning, and other skills relevant to a particular position. Many government application processes focus on resumes and experience in lieu of an examination, but testing requirements may remain for certain positions. Applicants required to take an examination must receive a certain score to be placed on an eligibility list for hiring.

Merit Principles

The set of rules and values that guide how civil service hiring and employment decisions are made. These principles ensure that candidates are evaluated based on their skills, experience, and qualifications—not political connections or favoritism. In practice, this means hiring through fair and open competition, using objective criteria (such as exams, applications, and structured interviews), and selecting candidates who are best qualified for the position.

Exempt Positions

Jobs in state government that are not part of the civil service system and are not required to follow standard civil service hiring rules. These positions are often filled through direct appointment rather than a competitive application process and may include leadership roles, policy staff, or roles that serve at the discretion of an elected official or agency head. They are at-times referred to as “term-appointments” because they can only be hired for set terms (i.e. between 1 and 4 years). Requirements and hiring processes for exempt positions vary by state and agency.

Background Check

For most government jobs, applicants must undergo a background check that may include an assessment of personal conduct, financial responsibility, and/or criminal history. Carefully review the job description to understand all the requirements and qualifications needed for the position.

Security Clearance

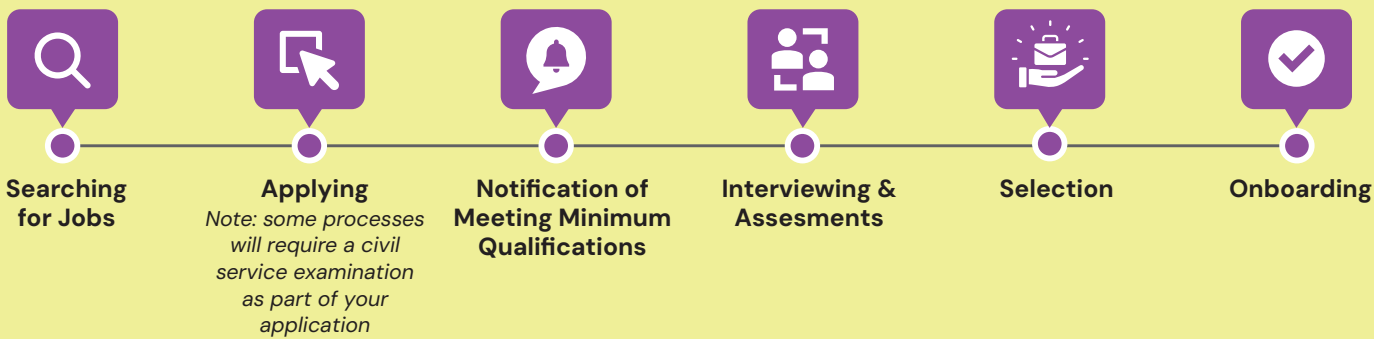
Security clearances are a specific, mandatory type of background check for roles that involve accessing classified information (sensitive government information). There are different levels of security clearance that require differences in the depth and length of the background check required. Review the job description carefully for additional information.

Veterans' Preference

A hiring preference that gives eligible veterans an advantage over other applicants in the public-sector hiring process. While most widely established as a policy in federal civil service, many state and local governments also have policies providing employment preference for veterans in their own hiring systems. Refer to the job description of the position you're applying for or the Human Resources contact listed, for more information.

Typical Public Sector Application Process

While each application process may vary, the public sector hiring process generally follows the following stages. We will walk you through each stage throughout this guide, sharing practical guidance, resources and tips from hiring managers and STARs.



Searching for Jobs

Where to Find State Government Jobs

Government Job Boards

While some public sector jobs are posted on job search and aggregation sites, like Indeed and LinkedIn, most are not. If you'd like access to all available jobs for a particular government, the best place to look is on the government's own job site.

- **State job boards:** State governments post job openings on their websites. To find jobs available within your state government, visit your state's official website and look for the "Careers," "Jobs," "Employment" or "Work with Us" sections, typically found in the navigation menu at the top or bottom of the state government's website. If you are unsure of where to find state job openings, you can do a quick search for "[State Name] state jobs" (i.e. California state jobs) and it should take you directly to your state's open jobs page.

Tip: You'll know you've reached your state government's official website, if you see ".gov" in the url.



State Spotlight

Some states express their commitments to skills-based hiring and offer resources for STARs on their website including "no-degree required jobs" or the ability to filter based on education level.

- **See the state of Arizona's job board as an example:** <https://www.azstatejobs.gov/jobs/search>
 - On the state of Arizona's job board, applicants can filter based on degree requirements. To find jobs with no bachelor's degree required, click on the postsecondary degree dropdown and select "no" for positions with no degree required.
- **Check out California's list of jobs with no degree required:** <https://calcareers.ca.gov/CalHRPublic/Jobs/NoDegreeRequired.aspx>
- **Check out Colorado's commitment to skills-based hiring:** <https://dhr.colorado.gov/dhr-resources/talent-pathways>

- **Agency websites:** Some agencies post jobs on their own site rather than the government’s central website. Most agencies have a jobs page on their website that provides helpful insights into their hiring processes, organizational charts and mission statements.
 - See [Colorado Department of Corrections’ website](#) as an example.

Public Sector Job Search Engines and Aggregators

Several third-party job boards aggregate public-sector job postings from federal, state, and local governments, making it easier to search across jurisdictions in one place. These sites often allow users to filter by location, job type, and minimum qualifications. They may not list all open jobs. Below are a few examples of some popular sites:

- **GovernmentJobs.com:** A widely used platform that hosts job postings for thousands of state, county, and city governments nationwide. <https://www.governmentjobs.com>
- **CareersInGovernment.com:** Aggregates public-sector job openings across local, state, and federal agencies, with filters for job category and location. <https://www.careersingovernment.com>
- **PublicServiceCareers.org:** Focuses on connecting job seekers with careers in public service, including state and local government roles. <https://www.publicservicecareers.org>

Some of Opportunity@Work’s partners are also working to aggregate public sector jobs in one place to support job seekers.

- **SkillUp:** Check out SkillUp’s [public sector career exploration page](#). SkillUp has done the work for you to determine which public sector jobs are open to STARs. At the time of the publishing this guide, the platform has over 700 jobs listed across the US in federal, state, and local government.
- **Gov-Ramps Aggregator:** With the help of generative AI, the Volcker Alliance, created an [open-source database](#) of internships, fellowships, and other entry-level career opportunities in local, state, and federal government. Applicants can filter jobs by no degree required.

Career Fairs

Career or job fairs are a great way to meet agency representatives to learn more about open positions. While there, you can learn straight from the source about the ins and outs of the application process. You can also use these fairs to ask about job pathways open to STARs.

- Visit your state or local government’s website to learn more about career fairs near you.
- Check out The Volcker Alliance’s [Tech to Gov Initiative](#) including [virtual career fairs](#) for jobseekers interested in transitioning from careers in tech to careers in government.

Understanding Public Sector Job Titles

The public sector offers a range of roles across disciplines from aerospace to the creative arts and engineering to education. In fact, almost every job that exists in the private sector also exists in the public sector. Knowing how to look for jobs within the public sector can be tricky, especially because public sector job titles can be different from those found in the private sector. Navigating each state’s job board will be different. Here are some general tips to help you as you explore.

“Many applicants struggle to identify suitable state job opportunities because they lack a clear starting point. We aim to develop a skills–matching tool for our website to address this challenge. Without such a tool, people often don’t know what specific job classifications to look for, even if they possess relevant skills.”



SALLY LY
Deputy Secretary, Workforce Development,
California Government Operations Agency

Public Sector Job Search Tips	Examples
<p>Tip #1</p> <p>Whenever possible, use advanced search filters on the job boards to help you look for jobs based on departments, job categories/industry or classifications of interest.</p>	<p>Use the keyword search function to look for specific roles. You can also filter by department, job category, classification, location, and work type (i.e. part-time or full time).</p>
	<p>The screenshot shows the CalCareers website's 'Advanced Job Search' interface. At the top, there are navigation links: Home, Get a State Job, State Employees, Veterans, Persons with Disabilities, State Retirees, and Create Account / Log In. Below the navigation is the 'Advanced Job Search' header. Underneath, there are three tabs: 'Advanced Job Search' (selected), 'Geographical Job Search', and 'Exam / Assessment Search'. The main search area is divided into two sections: 'Standard Search' and 'Advanced Filters'. In the 'Standard Search' section, the 'Keyword:' and 'Department:' fields are circled in red. In the 'Advanced Filters' section, the 'Job Code:' field is pre-filled with 'JC-'. The 'Job Categories:', 'Classification:', 'Location:', 'Work Type:', and 'Work Schedule:' fields are all circled in red. At the bottom right of the search area, there are 'Reset Form' and 'Search Jobs' buttons.</p>

Public Sector Job Search Tips	Examples
<p>Tip #2 Use online tools to help you compare public sector jobs with private sector roles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use STARsight.org to learn more about job titles, related roles, and skills required. Enter the job title you’re looking for in the search bar to find alternative job titles and employers with those jobs. Learn more about which roles can prepare you for the role you’re looking for and possible career pathways you can pursue with the skills gained in that role. Learn how many STARs are currently in the role you’re looking for and what skills you already have or need to gain for the role. • Compare public and private sector roles with CareerOneStop’s Compare Occupation Tool: Determine average wages and salaries, common skills, training and education requirements. Tip: You can use job titles found in STARsight to help you find the roles to compare. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Visit the FAQ page for step-by-step guidance on how to use the comparison tool. • Access support from Career Village’s AI-powered STARs Coach: Visit https://www.tearthepaperceiling.org/stars#cv-stars-coach to access the free tool. Coach was designed to help STARs navigate the job market and provide tangible guidance based on your skills, experience, and interest. Coach can help you explore the meaning of job titles, understand job descriptions better, and more. • Use Google or an AI search engine to compare public and private sector job titles. Some prompts you could use include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ What are some common public sector job titles for a project manager? ◦ What roles in the public sector are similar to a project manager? ◦ Help me compare what a project manager role would look like in the public sector and in the private sector.
<p>Tip #3 When you find a job you may be interested in, read the job description fully to help you understand the role and determine if you meet minimum qualifications. Pay close attention to indicators in the job title or description that can help you identify the job level and whether or not you may have experience for the position.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles that include “assistant”, “clerk”, “technician” or “specialist” in the job title, may be entry-level positions. • Roles that include “analyst” or “manager” in the job title may be mid-level positions. • Roles that include “director” or “senior” or “lead” in the job title may be more senior-level positions. • You may also see numbers within the job title, such as Analyst I, II, or III. This indicates a career ladder within a job series, with “I” being the lowest level requiring less experience, and “III” being the highest level within the job series, requiring the highest level of experience. You may be hired at any level based on your experience. Review the job classification to understand minimum qualifications required for the role. If you are interested in the type of work and you don’t meet all of the minimum qualifications, you may look at other jobs within that job classification.*

*Note – these are suggestions based on commonalities among state systems, but may not be true across all job titles in state government. Please refer to the job classification information found in the job description or reach out to the state agency for more information.



State Spotlight

To help applicants navigate more than 3,000 job classifications, the state of California has grouped their classifications into 22 major occupational groups. Applicants can [search for jobs by industry](#), such as healthcare, business and financial operations, office and administrative support, on the [CalCareers website](#). These occupational groupings are more aligned with how jobs are categorized in the private sector.



Applying

Crafting Your Winning Application

Government application requirements are often very different from the private sector. They may require more documentation and time to complete. For this reason, understanding the requirements of the application process and the particular job are extremely important. Be sure to read the instructions carefully when applying; because if you do not satisfy all application requirements, you will not be considered for the role, even if you have the skills for the job.

We have put together some steps to help you navigate the government application process, highlighting aspects that may be different from the private sector.

Step 1: Carefully review the job description to understand minimum qualifications and requirements to submit an application.

Before beginning an application, it is important to review the job description carefully to understand what is required to apply for the position, including minimum qualifications and any required documents, assessments, and/or certifications.

Minimum qualifications include key knowledge, skills, and abilities required for the position and may also include years of experience and/or educational requirements. Please note that if you do not meet minimum qualifications, your application will not be considered.

Pay close attention to **pre-screening requirements** (like civil service exams or online assessments).

The screenshot shows a job posting for 'HR Assistant' from the Department of Water Resources. The job number is JC-507935. The salary range is \$3,861.00 - \$6,276.00 per month. The final filing date is 3/3/2026. The job description and duties are detailed below the salary information. The 'Minimum Requirements' section lists 'ANALYST I' and 'ANALYST II'. The 'Additional Documents' section lists 'Job Application Package Checklist' and 'Duty Statement'. Annotations with arrows point to these sections, explaining where to find specific information.

Job Posting: HR Assistant

Department of Water Resources
JC-507935 - HR Assistant
ANALYST I
\$3,861.00 - \$6,276.00 per Month
New to State candidates will be hired into the minimum salary of the classification or minimum of alternate range when applicable.
Final Filing Date: 3/3/2026

Job Description and Duties

DWR's Executive Division is seeking an Analyst I or an Analyst II to support our managers with a wide variety of Human Resources duties. To succeed in this role, candidates should be dependable and detail-oriented; enjoy interacting with staff at all levels; and have excellent writing, critical thinking, and customer service skills. The work is fast-paced, ever-changing, and essential to the success of the Division and Department.
You will find additional information about the job in the [Duty Statement](#).

Minimum Requirements

You will find the Minimum Requirements in the Class Specification.

- ANALYST I
- ANALYST II

Additional Documents

- Job Application Package Checklist
- Duty Statement

Annotations:

- Left: If you were on the CA job portal, you would click here to review minimum qualifications for the position. (Points to Minimum Requirements)
- Right: Application documents required for submission can be found here (Points to Additional Documents)
- Bottom Right: Job description can be found here (Points to Job Description and Duties)

Application Instructions

Completed applications and all required documents must be received or postmarked by the Final Filing Date in order to be considered. Dates printed on Mobile Bar Codes, such as the Quick Response (QR) Codes available at the USPS, are not considered Postmark dates for the purpose of determining timely filing of an application.

Final Filing Date: 3/3/2026

Who May Apply

Individuals who are currently in the classification, eligible for lateral transfer, eligible for reinstatement, have list or LEAP eligibility, are in the process of obtaining list eligibility, or have SROA and/or Surplus eligibility (please attach your letter, if available). SROA and Surplus candidates are given priority; therefore, individuals with other eligibility may be considered in the event no SROA or Surplus candidates apply.

Applications will be screened and only the most qualified applicants will be selected to move forward in the selection process. Applicants must meet the Minimum Qualifications stated in the Classification Specification(s).

How To Apply

Complete Application Packages (including your Examination/Employment Application (STD 678) and applicable or required documents) must be submitted to apply for this Job Posting. Application Packages may be submitted electronically through your CalCareer Account at www.CalCareers.ca.gov. When submitting your application in hard copy, a completed copy of the Application Package listing must be included. If you choose to not apply electronically, a hard copy application package may be submitted through an alternative method listed below:

Address for Mailing Application Packages

You may submit your application and any applicable or required documents to:

Department of Water Resources
Mailing Address
Attn: Division of Human Resources
P.O. Box 1079
Sacramento, CA 95812

Address for Drop-Off Application Packages

You may drop off your application and any applicable or required documents at:

Department of Water Resources
Submit in Person
Certification Desk
715 P Street, 7th floor
Sacramento, CA 95814
08:00 AM - 04:30 PM

Required Application Package Documents

The following items are required to be submitted with your application. Applicants who do not submit the required items timely may not be considered for this job:

- Current version of the State Examination/Employment Application STD Form 678 (when not applying electronically), or the Electronic State Employment Application through your Applicant Account at www.CalCareers.ca.gov. All Experience and Education relating to the Minimum Qualifications listed on the Classification Specification should be included to demonstrate how you meet the Minimum Qualifications for the position.
- Resume is required and must be included.
- Statement of Qualifications - See Special Instructions for additional details.

Applicants requiring reasonable accommodations for the hiring interview process must request the necessary accommodations if scheduled for a hiring interview. The request should be made at the time of contact to schedule the interview. Questions regarding reasonable accommodations may be directed to the EEO contact listed on this job posting.

Desirable Qualifications (also known as preferred qualifications)

In addition to evaluating each candidate's relative ability, as demonstrated by quality and breadth of experience, the following factors will provide the basis for competitively evaluating each candidate:

Our ideal candidate will have experience with personnel administration; will communicate effectively with varied audiences both orally and in writing; possess excellent analytical, customer service, and writing skills and experience with Microsoft Office Word, Excel, and Outlook; work cooperatively with others; maintain regular, consistent, and predictable attendance; exercise good judgment; and enjoy supporting program activities. Experience with DWR's enterprise system, SAP, is a plus!



Tip

Before applying for a role, make a checklist of all the application requirements. First, list all the documentation that will be required (i.e. resume, cover letter, testing requirements, certifications). Then, outline the minimum and preferred qualifications for the position and how your experience demonstrates that you meet them.

Step 2: Complete application.

When applying for public sector jobs, it is **important that your application demonstrates that you fully meet the minimum qualifications needed for the position.** You can do this by being descriptive of the skills and experiences you've gained from previous work experience and taking full advantage of the work history and supplemental question sections of the application.

Be sure the "work experience" section of your application is complete and specifically addresses your qualifications, experience, and accomplishments as they relate to the job description, minimum qualifications, core competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) required for the role, and preferred qualifications, when applicable.

Although **you may submit a resume as part of your application, we advise you to not put "see resume" in lieu of completing the "work experience" section of an application.** We recommend you complete each section of the application for full consideration. Some applications may include supplemental questions that give agencies or hiring managers the opportunity to ask additional questions to understand your fit for the position. We also recommend you complete these questions fully, demonstrating how your work experiences prepares you to meet minimum qualifications, key competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities), and preferred qualifications listed in the job description.

Across the board, when we spoke to HR leaders, hiring managers emphasized the importance of applicants communicating their skills and how they are a match for the position. **As Talent Pathways Team Supervisor for the State of Colorado, Jennie Cecere, puts it, "agencies will review resumes and cover letters, but applicants really need to be descriptive in their application and demonstrate their skills, as it relates to the position."**



Tip: Ensure your application highlights the skills required for the job

When completing a public sector application, use your checklist to ensure that you have addressed the minimum and preferred qualifications required for the job. Human screeners review your application and will need to clearly see how you meet those qualifications in order to move your application forward. If an application includes "Supplemental Questions" or a "Statement of Qualifications," take full advantage of the additional opportunity to demonstrate how you meet minimum and/or preferred qualifications. These parts of the application are often used to directly assess your skills and specialized experience. Leaving them blank or not completing these sections fully can cause screeners to miss out on your talent.

Before submitting, ask yourself, "Can someone who doesn't know me clearly see that I meet the minimum and/or preferred qualifications without having to guess?" If the answer is no, go back through and make clearer connections. You've got this!

Step 3: Craft a skill-based resume*

Please note: Resumes may be optional. Refer to the job description for application requirements. The following tips are for applications in which resumes are required or can be submitted optionally.

You might not have a bachelor's degree, and that's perfectly fine! Your journey through apprenticeships, on-the-job learning, community work, or other alternative paths has equipped you with valuable skills that the public sector needs.

To help you highlight your skills and shine a light on how you meet minimum and preferred qualifications for the role, we recommend using a **Skills-Based Resume**. A skills-based resume combines the format of a traditional chronological resume with a functional resume. A skills-based resume draws attention to the skills you have right at the top with a professional summary statement and throughout the resume, as you group your work experiences by skill. This format allows you to show hiring managers that you have the necessary skills and qualifications for the position, regardless of where you've learned them. Below is a step-by-step process of how to structure a skills-based resume. Visit the appendix for a more detailed guide and template.

How to Structure a Skills-Based Resume

1. The Professional Summary

Start with a strong "elevator pitch" at the very top. This is a 2–3 sentence overview of who you are and the value you bring.

- **Example:** "Dedicated Customer Service Professional with 5+ years of experience managing high-volume client relations. Expert in conflict resolution and financial management, developed through small business ownership and community leadership roles."

2. The "Skills" Section

Create section headings for key skills you demonstrate that are aligned with the job description (e.g., project management, relationship building, communication). Under each heading, list bullet points of your achievements from any part of your life—work, volunteerism, or training.

- **If you led a community project:** Group these bullets under **Leadership & Management**. You likely developed skills in team coordination and budgeting.
- **If you completed a rigorous apprenticeship:** Group these under **Technical Expertise**. Highlight your discipline and specific trade skills.
- **If you managed a small business:** Group these under **Operations & Finance**. Showcase your customer service and financial oversight abilities.

3. Work Experience

In this section, list all of your relevant work experience including your role, organization, and dates of employment. Dates of employment are critical for you to receive credit for the years of work experience you have. Be accurate, as years of experience can sometimes be part of minimum qualifications. For each job, outline key responsibilities and results you achieved. See **Key Tips for Resume Section Success** for examples.

4. Education

List all educational experience including professional development training, bootcamps, 2-year degrees, and course credits. Include credits earned to date if your college degree is in progress and has not been completed. Minimum qualifications can sometimes include educational requirements. Outlining your educational experience in your resume and application fully can help screeners give you credit for meeting minimum qualifications.

5. Additional Sections

You may also choose to include additional sections to capture any other experience that may be relevant for the position including language proficiency, licenses and certifications, volunteer experience, and professional memberships.



Tip

Please ensure you **follow any recommended guidance on resume standards** that are shared in the job description and application process. For example, many government resumes require you to list start and end dates of previous jobs, hours worked per week, and and prefer more detail over minimal information, thereby encouraging multi-page resumes. In addition, if the state has a resume builder function, like the [federal government](#) does, we encourage you to use it. It will ensure you provide all the required information in the resume.

Key Tips for Resume Success

- **Begin with a strong professional summary.** A professional summary statement lets hiring managers know right at the top of your resume how your experience and skills match what is needed for the position.
- **Consider using a “functional resume” to summarize skills:** Use categories to demonstrate work experience and draw attention to the skills you’ve gained.
- **Use keywords:** Whenever possible, try to use similar language found in the job description to describe your experience.
- **Focus on results and quantify impact:** When writing resume bullet points, don’t just list responsibilities; articulate the results you achieved. Use numbers, percentages, and dollar amounts to prove your impact. **Instead of:** “Managed customer inquiries.” **Try:** “Successfully resolved an average of 15 customer inquiries daily, resulting in a 95% customer satisfaction rating.”
- **Highlight training:** Create a dedicated section for certifications, bootcamps, and apprenticeships.



Tip: Ensure your resume highlights the skills required for the role.

Utilize the checklist that you built in the beginning and go back through your resume to ensure each of the minimum qualifications listed in the job posting and as many preferred qualifications as possible are included.

Ask yourself the same question: “If someone who didn’t know me was reading this resume, could they easily tell that I meet the minimum and preferred qualifications without having to guess or make big leaps?”

Step 4: Upload supporting documents.

Attach required documents such as resumes, cover letters, transcripts, licenses, certifications, and work or writing samples. Some applications may allow the option to submit additional information to support your application. Take advantage of this opportunity to include additional information, not already covered in the application, that may demonstrate your experience for the position. When in doubt, include additional information to help you stand out.



Tip

Use your cover letter to explain how gaining skills through alternative routes taught you to solve problems in real-world environments. Provide documentation of skills gained through alternative routes including short-term credentials, training programs, bootcamps, volunteer experience, on-the-job training, community college, course credits, and military experience.

Step 5: Review and submit application. Carefully review your application before submitting to ensure:

- All fields are completed
- Your contact information including your email address and phone number is correct
- You have included a detailed work history that demonstrates your experience aligned with minimum qualifications (and preferred qualifications, if applicable) outlined in the job posting
- You have answered all supplemental questions
- You have uploaded all required documents including resumes, cover letters, certificates, licenses, and military experience.



Tip

Utilize your checklist and refer back to the job posting to ensure you have met all requirements and included all required documentation. Check your email and/or applicant portal for confirmation and to track your application status.

Understanding the Timeline: Patience and Preparation

It is important to know upfront that the public sector hiring process often moves at a slower pace than the private sector, sometimes taking several months to complete. This extended timeline is not a reflection of your qualifications; rather, it is due to the standardized, merit-based system designed to ensure every applicant receives a fair and equal review. Do not let the wait discourage you. Instead, view this time as an opportunity to prepare yourself to progress through the application process. Use the waiting period to practice interviewing with a mentor, friend, or [CareerVillage's STARs Coach](#) ensuring you are ready to shine when the call comes.

Check your email and the application portal often. You may receive emails or notifications as your application moves through the process.

While the process requires patience, remember that persistence is key, and the reward of a meaningful career serving the public good can be well worth the effort.



Interviewing and Assessments

When you apply for a public sector job, the process is designed to fairly assess and find the most qualified candidates for the position. You can expect **structured interviews**, an assessment method designed to measure job-related competencies of candidates by systematically inquiring about their behavior in past experiences and/or their proposed behavior in hypothetical situations.⁵ This interview may happen with one interviewer or a **panel interview**, where you will meet with a small group of interviewers rather than just one person.

Each interview will use a standardized set of questions and a consistent scoring rubric for everyone, with the goal of reducing bias and ensuring that every candidate is evaluated by the same metrics. Additionally, some positions may require additional assessments, such as civil service examinations, occupational questionnaires, or work samples. Be sure to review the job description to understand what additional assessments may be required for the role. Think of these assessments not as hurdles, but as opportunities—they are your chance to demonstrate your job-specific knowledge and practical skills in action, proving exactly why you are the right fit for the role.

Interviewing Tips to Showcase Your Skills and Experience

Public sector interviews often focus on understanding your past behavior to predict your future performance. This is where the STAR method can come in handy. (*Note: In the context of interviewing, “STAR” is an acronym for **Situation, Task, Action, Result**. This is a specific technique and is distinct from the term STARs used to describe workers skilled through alternative routes.*) It provides a structured way to answer behavioral questions, allowing you to clearly and concisely showcase your skills and experiences, even if they come from non-traditional pathways.

The STAR Method:

Situation (S): Describe the specific situation or context of the experience you’re sharing.

Task (T): Explain the task or challenge you faced within that situation.

Action (A): Detail the specific actions you took to address the task or challenge. This is crucial for highlighting your skills!

Result (R): Describe the outcome of your actions. Quantify your results whenever possible.

Example of a response using the STAR Method:

Question: “Tell me about a time you had to learn something new quickly.”

Response:

- **Situation:** “In my previous role as a lead technician at a local repair shop, we acquired a new, highly specialized diagnostic machine that none of us had prior experience with.”
- **Task:** “My task was to quickly become proficient in using this machine so we could begin offering this new service to our customers, as there was a high demand.”

- **Action:** “I immediately sought out all available resources, including the manufacturer’s manual, online tutorials, and even contacted a technician at another shop who had experience with the machine. I dedicated several hours each day to hands-on practice, experimenting with different functions and troubleshooting simulated issues.”
- **Result:** “Within one week, I was able to independently operate the diagnostic machine and train the other technicians on its basic functions. This allowed the shop to launch the new service ahead of schedule and significantly increase our service revenue by 15% in the following quarter.”

Key Interview Tips for STARs

- The interview is your time to shine by continuing to showcase your skills and fit for the position.
- Prepare several responses to potential interview questions using the STAR Method in advance, drawing from your most relevant experiences. **Chief Human Resources Officer for Arizona Department of Economic Security advises “know your story; don’t rely on just the resume.”**
- Practice your responses with a friend or mentor to gain confidence.
- Emphasize the skills you developed through alternative routes that directly relate to the position.
- Ask thoughtful questions about the agency’s mission and how your role would contribute to it.
- Send a thank-you note after the interview, reiterating your interest and key qualifications.



Selection

Tentative Offer and Background Check

In the public sector, receiving an offer of employment may come in the form of a tentative offer or conditional offer before a final offer. This means the agency has selected you based on your skills and qualifications, but the offer is conditional upon passing a thorough background check. Unlike the private sector, some government roles require security clearances, fingerprinting, and verification of your history, which can extend the timeline significantly. While this waiting period can test your patience, remember that the long-term rewards are exceptional. The application process is rigorous because you will be entrusted to serve the public. State and government jobs are highly sought after because they can offer stability, security, and exceptional benefits, including regular work schedules, paid overtime, robust health insurance, generous vacation time, and guaranteed pension plans. The process is thorough because the rewards are substantial—hang in there, as the destination may be well worth the journey.

Final Offer

You got the job! Congratulations! After a long process of interviewing, potential background checks and waiting to hear back, your hard work paid off. You successfully demonstrated you have the skills to do the job. Before you accept the job, take some time to review your offer. Below are a few recommendations to consider including how negotiating an offer might differ in the public sector.

- **Review your offer letter and the position details:** Confirm the exact job title, classification and pay grade, duties, and reporting structure.
- **Assess job fit and culture:** Consider whether or not the position, duties, and agency culture align with your professional goals, as job fit strongly influences job satisfaction and retention.
- **Review your total compensation package:** Public sector jobs often feature excellent benefits (including health insurance, retirement plans and pensions, generous leave time, tuition assistance and student loan repayment) that can outweigh a lower base salary compared to the private sector.

- **Understand whether you can negotiate:** While government agencies do have structured pay scales, there can sometimes be room for negotiation for roles that have a salary range and for specialized positions. When in doubt, ask the question and be prepared to justify your negotiation request with documentation and experience.

What to Do If You Did Not Get the Job

Reframe and Recalibrate

Reaching the offer stage is the ultimate goal, but the path there is rarely a straight line. In the public sector, as in any field, you may hear “no” before you hear “yes.”

Rejection is an inevitable part of applying to jobs, but it is not a dead end. It is a signal to recalibrate. The most successful STARs view every interview not just as a “high-stakes bet,” but as a “practice test”—a chance to refine their story and sharpen their skills for the next opportunity.

If you receive a notification that you were not selected to move forward in the process, allow yourself to feel disappointed, but then shift your focus on *growth*. Your resilience is one of your greatest assets. Use the moment to reframe the experience from a loss into a learning opportunity.

- **Ask for Feedback:** Send a professional follow-up email thanking the interviewer for their time and asking if they can share one area where you could improve.
- **Capture Your Learnings:** While the interview is fresh, log what went well and what didn't. Did a specific question trip you up? Did a certain story about your skills land really well?
- **Refine Your Narrative:** Use those learnings add to an “interview cheat sheet.” You may need to adjust how you describe a specific project or highlight a different strength next time.
- **Remember the “Lead Indicator”:** Getting an interview in the first place is a huge win. It means your application and skills are competitive. You are close.

Perseverance is Key

Job seeking can sometimes feel like a cycle, but you are not starting from scratch each time; you are starting from experience. Lean on your community. Reach out to mentors, peers, or fellow job seekers to vent, recharge, and get advice. When the right offer does come, you will be more prepared than ever to accept it.



Onboarding

Congratulations on starting your new job! Below are a few recommended action steps as you settle into your new role.

- **Review your agency's handbook.** Ask clarifying questions about policies and practices.
- **Explore your benefits.** The public sector offers many unique benefits including robust retirement plans, student loan repayments, loan forgiveness, and tuition assistance. Check out the appendix to learn more about benefits of working with states participating in the SkillUp Public Sector Hiring Pilot (Arizona, California, and Colorado).
- **Build relationships for success.** Connect with colleagues and your supervisor for support in orienting yourself to your new role.

Conclusion

Your Future in Public Service Begins Now!

Throughout this playbook, we have explored the tactical steps to launching a public sector career. As a STAR, you now have the tools to translate your experience into a powerful skills-based resume, master the STAR Method for telling impactful stories during an interview, and navigate the complexities of offers and salary negotiations.

Remember that the public sector needs individuals with diverse backgrounds and practical, hands-on skills — exactly what you bring to the table. Your alternative route to developing skills is not a limitation but rather a unique strength that can set you apart in the hiring process.



Your Advantages as a STAR:

- **Practical, hands-on experience** that directly translates to job functions
- **Proven adaptability and problem-solving** in real-world situations
- **Unique perspectives** that contribute to innovation and diverse thinking
- **Demonstrated work ethic** and commitment to professional growth

As you begin or continue your journey into public service, remember that **persistence is key**. The hiring process may take time, but the rewards of a meaningful career serving the public good are well worth the effort.

Appendix

Additional Tools & Resources

- **Federal Government Job Boards and Resources**

- [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov): The official website for federal government job opportunities
- <https://gogovernment.org>: The Partnership for Public Service’s site that includes resources for applying to federal government jobs
- <https://www.governmentjobs.com/>: Government job search engine and site with resources for applying to federal government jobs

- **Local Government Job Boards and Resources**

- Cities and county governments also post positions on their websites. You can check directly there for openings in local government.
 - ▶ See [Hennepin County’s job board](#) as an example. Hennepin County, Minnesota has a pathways program to provide training for careers in public service. Click [here](#) to learn more.

- **Career Exploration Resources**

Evaluate your skills and work preferences to guide career choices.

- **STARs Coach widget, powered by Career Village:** <https://www.tearthepaperceiling.org/stars>
- **CareerOnestop Skills Matcher:** <https://www.careeronestop.org/Toolkit/Skills/skills-matcher.aspx>
- **Jobscan’s Career Change Tool:** <https://www.jobscan.co/career-change>
- **LinkedIn’s Career Explorer Tool:** <https://linkedin.github.io/career-explorer/#explore>
- **Partnership for Public Service [career guides](#):** designed to help federal jobseekers identify jobs by industry, job series codes that can be used to search for jobs on [USAJOBS.gov](https://www.usajobs.gov) including sample job descriptions to help jobseekers understand eligibility criteria for the position.

- **Resume, Cover Letter, and Interview Support Resources**

Articulate your skills and own your story to create impactful application materials and interviews.

- [Opportunity@Work’s Skills-based Resume Guide](#)
- CareerCircle’s – [Resume Builder](#) and [Interview Prep](#)
- [Resume Scriptor](#)
- [Revision Learning Resources](#)
- [Career.io Resume Builder](#)

- **Learn more about Tear the Paper Ceiling and discover more resources for STARs:**
tearthepaperceiling.org

- **Discover STARs in the Public Sector**

- Learn about Winston, Cheri, and Jason’s pathway to the public sector at <https://skillup.org/public-sector>
- Read about Mark Lorando and Sheronda Baltimore’s story at <https://www.opportunityatwork.org/star-stories>

Spotlight on SkillUp Pilot States

Read below for some unique features of each of the states participating in the SkillUp Public Sector Hiring Pilot.

Arizona

- **The Resume–First Model:** Arizona does not require a lengthy application. A resume submission is primarily what is required in the initial application. Recruiters will assess your resume against the minimum and preferred qualifications and invite all eligible candidates to interview.
- **Second–Chance Employer:** Arizona utilizes a two–part application process. Part one focuses on work history, while part two focuses on criminal history. Because Arizona is a second–chance employer, part two is collected after the interview to ensure a candidate’s history does not unfairly bias the hiring manager’s initial view.
- **At–Will Employment:** Most state positions in Arizona (with some exceptions) are at–will, meaning there are no civil service exams required.
- **[State of Arizona Job Benefits](#)**
 - Including access to professional development through LinkedIn Learning, tuition discounts and reimbursement, potential eligibility for student loan forgiveness, transportation and retail discounts

California

- **The Civil Service Examination:** California requires a competitive examination to ensure merit–based hiring. This functions as an eligibility requirement to prove you meet the base requirements of a job classification, rather than a final skills test. To be appointed, you must pass the exam and fall within a “reachable rank” on the eligibility list.
- **State Standard 678:** This is the mandatory application form for all state jobs; resumes are not always required statewide, though individual departments may ask for them.
- **Statement of Qualifications (SOQ):** Some state jobs require candidates to submit a Statement of Qualifications. An SOQ is an opportunity for candidates to demonstrate exactly how their skills match the job’s qualifications. Refer to the job posting to see if you are required to submit an SOQ. Check out this [video](#) to learn how to write an effective SOQ.
- **[State of California Job Benefits](#)**
 - Including potential eligibility for student loan forgiveness, flexible paid leave, on–the–job training and professional development

Colorado

- **Human–Centered Review:** Colorado utilizes a “comparative analysis” model where formal applications are screened by human analysts—not AI—to ensure they meet minimum qualifications. Because humans review these, using keywords directly from the job description to describe your experience is highly recommended.
- **Residency Requirements:** Per the state constitution, residency is often the primary qualifier. Applicants usually must provide a Colorado address, and this is rarely waived unless specified.
- **Pay Transparency:** Colorado mandates pay transparency, meaning job postings will always include a clear pay range or a link to a pay plan.
- **[State of Colorado Job Benefits](#)**
 - Including potential eligibility for student loan forgiveness, wellness programs, and employee discounts

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About Opportunity@Work

Opportunity@Work is a nonprofit social enterprise dedicated to advancing economic opportunities for the more than 70 million U.S. workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) instead of through a bachelor's degree. Opportunity@Work's research capabilities inform the nation's understanding of STARs and uncover insights that show how to make positive change within regions and industries. The organization engages with corporate, public sector, and philanthropic partners to directly address the barriers that STARs face and equip organizations to make hiring STARs for higher-wage roles the norm. Learn more at www.opportunityatwork.org.



About SkillUp

SkillUp is a nonprofit that helps individuals secure high-opportunity employment. Focusing on non-degree career pathways that provide livable wages. SkillUp's comprehensive career platform supports job-seekers from start to finish. SkillUp has 170+ coalition partners who provide the best upskilling and career resources to workers across the country. Learn more at skillup.org.