

County Jobs Can Offer Unparalleled Benefits, Both Tangible and Intangible

By Sue Lyn Schramm

Special to *The Examiner*

Finding the perfect job means searching for the best combination of rewards, and the ideal combination differs for each job seeker. Salary, lifestyle and benefits are all important, but so are emotional elements like collegiality and the opportunity to make a difference through one's work.

Candidates seeking work that will benefit their own community and neighborhoods should look no further than the many local government jurisdictions in the Washington area. Counties and other local governments are some of the region's largest employers, offering benefits both tangible and intangible to workers in a broad range of roles.

"Community impact is a big part of what makes this work so rewarding," according to Chris Green, Automated Services Bureau Chief for Arlington County's Department of Human Services. He tells candidates that the best part of a county job may be the opportunity to work on highly visible projects that affect many lives. "IT people in the county get interesting problems to solve with a real effect on the community. And not many organizations do as great a variety of things:

put out fires, protect the residents and deliver water to your house."

Green came from an earlier career in private enterprise. "I got frustrated in a previous job because it was short-term consulting-type work. We came in, solved problems with short deadlines, and then left," he said. "I missed a sense of community and being connected to solutions in a lasting way."

Working for local government provided Green the culture of relationships he was seeking. "People may think that government work is bureaucratic, but I haven't found that to be as true as you might think."

In his experience, county workers may wear multiple hats in the effort to get large things done despite limited resources. "We often find ourselves working very independently on a number of aspects of the work. You may have to be project manager, marketer and change manager all at the same time."

Green says that salary isn't the biggest reason to seek government employment. Although Arlington and other local employers keep salaries competitive, Green feels pure salary isn't as important as it is in the private sector. "What I tell candidates is that public work provides visibility and the oppor-

tunity for real influence. While your consulting buddies are talking about being a small part of a big team that did X, Y, and Z - here you are the person doing all that. That shows up on a resume."

When it comes to fringe benefits, government employers are second to none. County governments usually offer rich packages of em-

ployment benefits including health and life insurance, commuting and child care subsidies, retirement benefits, and perhaps even a pension.

Lifestyle is another element that draws many people to life in county and local government. Comparing county employment to his previous work as a consultant, Green said, "I compare it to the mindset

of the student versus the farmer. The student has one semester to finish a class or a project, then he's done; it's over. The farmer knows there will be more work tomorrow and the day after that. While we do have crunch times in county government when work intensifies, we also know the work never stops. It's no good burning yourself out."

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Security Clearance *continued*

test. Polygraphs usually focus on a candidate's allegiance to the U.S. or ask further questions about the candidate's private life in order to discover issues that might lead a person to be blackmailed.

Active clearances are worth a particular premium right now because of a massive backlog on security investigations. Requests for security clearances skyrocketed after September 11, 2001, and the federal government is dealing with unprocessed applications amounting to hundreds of thousands by some estimates. New applications are expected to take an average of eighteen months to investigate and approve, but the time required may stretch upwards to two years or even more.

"It took me sixteen months to get clearance when I applied ten years ago," says McCarty, "but things are taking much longer now. The longest delay I've heard of person-

ally was 28 months."

Once approved, active security clearances do not expire as long as the employee continues doing classified work, but they are subject to periodic re-investigation. Re-investigations, like initial investigations, are suffering from large backlogs. They are supposed to be performed every five years for Top Secret clearances and every ten years for those with Secret classification.

Be aware that changing jobs can affect a security clearance. If a worker with a clearance leaves the job where he or she was doing classified work, their clearance becomes "current" rather than "active" and a two-year clock begins ticking that will eventually cause the clearance status to expire. After two years of current status, the security clearance becomes invalid and the candidate must start the application process all over again.

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