Considering a Career as a District Attorney?

Why should you become a District Attorney (D.A.)? Every city in the United States needs a prosecutor, someone who is devoted to upholding the constitution, protecting the public, and prosecuting criminal behavior when it occurs in their district. Large metropolitan areas typically have a considerable number of special units that hire D.A.s to concentrate on despicable crimes such as homicide, rape, and domestic violence.

One of the most rewarding benefits of beginning a career in the office of a D.A. is the valuable experience gained at trial. Fresh attorneys, who recently graduated from law school, might start doing backup work at an established law firm, while an attorney working in the office of a D.A. will quickly be exposed to the inside of a courtroom.

Cases with statewide bearing are generally prosecuted by the State Attorney General Offices. Attorneys who prosecute at the state level usually operate with local D.A. offices. Each state also has a State Attorney General's office, and they are responsible for representing the states interest in court.

There are also federal prosecutors who work for the Department of Justice and they have many offices across the United States of America. There are 90 U.S. attorneys who coordinate federal prosecutions and must report to the highest cop of the land, the Attorney General.

D.A.’s Education and Training

American Bar Association (ABA) certified schools offer students courses that provide a diverse selection of knowledge required to investigate, research, and manage a case during prosecution. As students become familiar with courtroom procedure, they will also be responsible for taking specialized courses in ethics, criminal law, and civil law. The reputation of the law school as well as the students understanding of the courses he/she sat through will determine if they are qualified to work at the local D.A.’s office.

While attending law school, students frequently search for an intern position at the D.A.’s office. They want to build hands-on experience while they enhance their resume. After graduation from law school, potential attorneys must go through the grueling process of passing the bar exam before they decide which state to practice in.

D.A.’s Career Salary

Although prosecutors make less money than attorneys who join private firms, they are pleased to gain experience in an area that protects the public and consider the position an essential component in their career. Depending on which area in the country the prosecutor practices law, his/her salary ranges from $25,000 to $55,000. Experienced prosecutors can easily earn more than $100,000.

The salary of the D.A. also depends on how much experience they have, their length of service, and the
hiring entity. According to PayScale.com, “the national average salary for a D.A. falls between $50,603 and $89,310 a year.”

Location, Location, Location

The salary for a D.A. varies by location. According to SimplyHired, as of May 2010, “the average salary for a D.A. working in Dallas, Texas, was $56,000. The average salary for a D.A. working in Santa Clara, California, was $73,000. The average salary for a D.A. working in Washington, D.C., and Nashville, Tennessee, were $74,000 and $52,000 respectively. D.A. working in New York, New York, can expect to earn $64,000 annually.” Salaries also differ within a state as well.

How Much Experience

The amount of experience needed to obtain a D.A. position also differs by location. For example, according to findtherightjob.com, as of July 1, 2007, “the average starting salary for a D.A. in Philadelphia was $48,975.” In New York, most D.A. positions are given to experienced candidates. “There is very little difference in salary for a newly graduated lawyer and a lawyer with more experience. In this location, new hires fresh from law school earn $53,500 while the starting salary for newly hired attorneys with more experience is $54,000.”

D.A.’s Get Great Benefits

Another reason why law students should contemplate becoming a D.A. is because of the excellent benefits. In many districts across the country, a D.A. is entitled to the same benefits as other city employees. According to eHow.com’s article, “The Average Salary for a D.A.,” a Philadelphia D.A. ’s “benefits include 11 paid holidays a year, a pension plan, sick leave, 20 paid vacation days, four annual leave days, and medical and life insurance. In New York, a D.A. earns four weeks of annual paid leave in addition to the same health and pension benefits as other city employees.”

According to manhattanda.org/salary-and-benefits, which is The New York County District Attorney’s Office web page, during 2012-13, the starting salary for an Assistant District Attorney joining the office “is expected to be $60,000 for law school graduates not yet admitted to the practice of law, and $60,500 for newly admitted attorneys. The salary is higher for those applicants who have practiced elsewhere before joining the staff. Periodic raises have typically been granted, as the budget allows.”

The New York County District Attorney’s Office also lists an exceptional benefit package that includes a “comprehensive insurance plan.” The insurance plan provides “medical, dental and vision, life and long-term disability options.” The office goes on to state they also bestow a “generous vacation time, parental leaves, domestic partnership benefits, pre-tax spending options and deferred compensation plans.” If that wasn’t enough incentive to get you to join The New York District Attorney’s Office, then perhaps you would be persuaded if each district attorney got a brand new BlackBerry and had the ability to access the network remotely. That’s exactly what the website claims.

Hiring Entity

It’s possible for an assistant district attorney employed at the federal level to earn more money than an assistant district attorney working at the state level. USAjobs.com has a comprehensive list of salaries for an assistant district attorney employed for the U.S. Department of Justice. The website lists $50,894 on the bottom end of the pay scale for assistant district attorneys and $134,792 at the highest end of the pay scale.

Prosecutor Carlos Vega

On Tuesday, August 21, the Philly.com article, “On city salaries, some prosecutors work two jobs to make ends meet,” caught up with Carlos Vega, a veteran homicide prosecutor. He was responsible for “putting scumbags behind bars, sometimes for life.” The prosecutor’s most recent high profile case included “Antonio Rodriguez, the so-called Kensington Strangler, who was convicted Thursday of three counts of first-degree murder, rape and related offenses in the deaths of three women.” Vega began his career in the D.A.’s office 30 years ago and has been prosecuting for 25 years. Vega found his profession fulfilling, but the candid attorney admitted, “Although we’re attorneys, we work for the city. We don’t make the money that people think lawyers make.”

Vega, who is in his 50s, wants his children to have the same education that he had while growing up in New York City. The prosecutor attended Catholic schools in the Empire State. The attorney pointed out that some prosecutors will have a second job, maybe as a bartender, or in Vega’s case, working at UPS. In the
Philly.com article, Vega said, “If I didn’t work at UPS, I really believe I couldn’t have” put the kids through Catholic schools. He continued to say, “I couldn’t have, because I need to live and eat.”

The prosecutor has approximately 55 homicide cases on his desk right now. Even with his current night shift, Vega makes his 15-year-old daughter his top priority. The prosecutor cooks his daughter breakfast and drives her to school.

In the same Philly.com article, spokeswoman Tasha Jamerson is also quoted. She mentioned assistant D.A.s starting salary. The spokeswoman said, “Assistant D.A.s (not including chiefs or assistant chiefs) earn anywhere from a starting salary of $48,975 to about $125,000.” She also stated that more than half of assistant D.A.s make less than $70,000 a year. Now this is probably a decent salary for most single people in the United States, but if you are like Vega and want to send your children to Catholic school or want to make more money, you might have to get a second job if you want to be a D.A.

Prosecutor Career Opportunities

Law students who have recently graduated should be determined to become a prosecutor not only for the outstanding benefits, but also because there is an excellent chance of obtaining the position. Remember, there are many prosecutors needed across the country to uphold and preserve justice. Even though trial experience is essential, there are many entry level positions available to young attorneys who have already volunteered their services or gained experience as an intern when they applied for a summer position while at law school.

Prosecutors with experience at the state level are known to move into a position to prosecute at the federal level. If you are an attorney not interested in joining a private law firm or working for a corporation, you might want to seriously consider giving a D.A. position a chance. If you are a young ambitious attorney who might be seeking political office later in life, there is no better way to gain experience and to get to know the people in your community than to become a D.A.

Please see the following articles for more information about jobs related to criminal law:

- Matt Murphy, Senior Deputy District Attorney, Orange County, California
- How to Become a District Attorney
- What Does It Mean When a Lawyer Says “Permission to Treat the Witness as Hostile?”
- The Life and Career of Attorney Nancy Grace, Who Turned Lawyer after the Murder of Her Fiance.
- Top 39 Tips for New Litigation Associates and Trial Lawyers: How to Be a Good Litigation Attorney
- Job Opportunities in Criminal Law
- Jury Consultants Continue to be in Hot Demand
- The Life and Career of Marcia Clark Criminal Defense Attorney

Click Here to View the 2015 Salaries of the Top Law Firms.