Career Opportunities in
CAPITOL HILL

Description of the field
Capitol Hill offers a wide range of exciting and demanding employment opportunities. Employment on the Hill generally refers to positions available in one of the 535 congressional offices (100 in the Senate and 435 in the House of Representatives) or among the 300 committees and subcommittees. Most committees are divided into majority and minority staffs that perform several functions, including:

- **Research and subject specialists** who conduct legislative research, draft bills, and follow upcoming legislation;
- **Ombudsmen** who respond to constituent inquiries, handle general administration, and promote the public image (and future elections) of their representatives; and
- **Committee staff** who support the legislative process by drafting legislation, preparing background reports, arranging for expert testimony, and serving as the liaison between Congress and the administration on policy matters.

Congressional staffers perform a variety of different functions so there are opportunities for individuals with varying interests and capabilities. All congressional offices need administrative support personnel as well as public relations staff who may respond to constituent issues and/or promote the elected officer’s public image. Many APSIA graduates seek positions as issue specialists working in the legislative area conducting research, preparing background reports, drafting bills, following legislation, and arranging for expert testimony.

Career Paths
There is no pre-defined typical career path on Capitol Hill. With elections every two years and with only a fraction of current Senators with 25 years or more of service, very few staffers are able to spend an entire career working for one member of Congress. Many congressional staffers use their congressional positions as stepping stones to the executive branch, private sector, think tanks, and nonprofit organizations. As turnover is so common on the Hill, opportunities for promotion on both personal and committee staffs are available.

**Demand**
+ Entry-level positions are highly competitive and many jobs on Capitol Hill are not advertised. Inquiries directed to the offices of one’s own representatives (particularly if one shares their party affiliation) can be helpful, as can a Capitol Hill internship. Most congressional staffers will readily admit that networking is frequently the key to securing a position on the Hill. Post-election is a good time to look for a job on the House side; while campaign staffers may fill some positions, newly elected representatives need to staff the Washington office quickly.

**Challenges of the Profession**
+ As the country addresses the national deficit and economic situation by beginning to cut spending, those working on Capitol Hill will face compensation issues as well as the usual long and unpredictable work hours, constituent demands, and strenuous workloads. Innovation and creativity will be key, as the profession will require more productivity from fewer resources.
The high turnover rate provides numerous opportunities for enterprising job seekers. Staff sizes vary considerably, with networking often the key to securing a position, as many openings are highly competitive and are not always advertised. In addition, an internship with a member of Congress provides an excellent opportunity to build contacts and show interest in public service. A good time to look for a position, particularly with a Representative, is just after an election.

Some of the more common entry-level positions include:

**Receptionist/Staff Assistant** – Serves as the main point of contact for the office, which involves routing incoming calls, distributing messages and mail to staffers, and handling constituent requests.

**Legislative Correspondent** – Drafts responses to a Member’s mail and deals with a range of constituent requests and inquiries concerning legislation and national policy.

**Legislative Assistant** – Briefs the Member on a number of issues, helps draft legislation, writes position papers, and addresses constituent inquiries. In some offices, Legislative Assistants may handle five or six different issues.

**Press Secretary/Communications Director** – Acts as the key link between the Member of Congress and the media. He/she directs publicity by issuing press releases, organizing radio and TV spots, giving speeches, etc.

**Legislative Director** – Heads the legislative staff, updates the Member on the status of bills in Congress, and maintains close contact with a number of constituencies, including other Hill staffers and lobbyists.

**Administrative Assistant/Chief of Staff** – Oversees the operation of the entire office, both in Washington and in the area represented by the Senator or Representative’s home state or district. Individuals in this position generally have at least ten years’ experience working in Congress.

**Sample Employers**

- Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe – [csce.gov](http://csce.gov)
- Congressional Research Service – [loc.gov/crsinfo](http://loc.gov/crsinfo)
- House Committee on Foreign Affairs – [internationalrelations.house.gov](http://internationalrelations.house.gov)
- Senate Foreign Relations Committee – [foreign.senate.gov](http://foreign.senate.gov)
- Senate Select Committee on Intelligence – [intelligence.senate.gov](http://intelligence.senate.gov)

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**QUALIFICATIONS TO ENTER THE FIELD**

+ Entry-level positions require a bachelor’s degree while a master’s is necessary for advancement.

+ Substantive knowledge in areas relevant to a Member’s committee work and a demonstrated understanding of the legislative process can be helpful in securing a position.

+ Strong written communication skills are essential, and it is important to be able to write concisely and precisely.

+ Oral communication and interpersonal skills are also important in handling constituent problems, meeting with lobbyists and interest groups, and dealing with the media.

+ The pace of most congressional offices requires high energy, commitment, and flexibility.
Resources for Additional Information

Placement Offices
- House Vacancy Announcement and Placement Service Office – house.gov/content/jobs
- House Employment Bulletin – house.gov/content/jobs/hvaps_subscribe.php
- Senate Placement Office – senate.gov/visiting/common/generic/placement_office.htm
- Senate Employment Bulletin – senate.gov/employment/po/positions.htm
- Congressional Management Foundation – www.congressfoundation.org

Internet Resources
- Roll Call – www.rollcall.com
- Opportunities in Public Affairs – www.opajobs.com

Publications