



What Government Employment Services Can—and Cannot—Do for You

The first step in using a public employment service is to align your expectations with the assistance it provides.

When I encountered my county's employment service representative, he made his role clear:

"I'm not here to find a job for you. My role is assistance in locating the career path you are best suited for and what you need to do to achieve your goals."

That distinction is useful. If you arrive expecting someone to arrange your next job, you may leave disappointed. If you arrive ready to examine your options and develop a plan, the assistance can be valuable.

His explanation described his particular role. Other public employment staff may provide job leads, employer referrals, or hiring events as well. Ask what your local office offers rather than assuming every service works the same way.

Begin by Clarifying the Relationship

At your first appointment, explain what you need and ask what the representative can help you accomplish.

You might need immediate employment, help changing careers, advice about training, or assistance understanding why your applications are not producing interviews. Those needs call for different kinds of support.

Ask:

“What assistance can I receive here, what will I need to do myself, and what should we aim to accomplish first?”

You should leave with a clearer understanding of both the available help and your next responsibilities.

Know Which Office You Need

Public employment services can operate under state, county, or local names. Many are part of the American Job Center network.

An employment-assistance office is not necessarily the office that administers unemployment benefits. Nor is it the personnel department that hires people for government positions. Services may share a location or provide referrals, but their responsibilities differ.

Use the [American Job Center Finder](#) to locate free employment assistance. Contact the office before visiting to confirm its services, appointment arrangements, and any documents you should bring.

Use Career Guidance to Explore Realistic Options

Career counseling can help you identify interests, assess skills, and investigate suitable occupations. This can be especially useful when your former occupation has changed or you are unsure how your experience transfers.

Approach assessments as tools for discussion. They can suggest possibilities, but they should not decide your future by themselves.

Discuss practical considerations alongside interests: wages, location, schedules, transportation, family responsibilities, and the time you can devote to training.

Our companion article, **“How to Use the Bureau of Labor Statistics Before Choosing Your Next Job,”** explains how to research duties, preparation, wages, and employment outlook. Bring that research to your appointment and ask how it compares with local conditions.

Ask About Practical Job-Search Assistance

Depending on the location, services may include résumé help, interview workshops, computer access, job listings, employer referrals, and hiring events. CareerOneStop describes these and other forms of [local job-search assistance](#).

Be specific about where you are struggling. “I need a job” describes the overall problem; “I’m applying for office-support positions but receiving no interview invitations” gives a counselor something more concrete to examine.

If you already have a clear career direction, ask for help acting on it. You may benefit more from identifying suitable employers or improving an application than from another general assessment.

Explore Training Without Assuming Funding Is Automatic

Ask whether additional training is necessary for your target occupation and whether you may qualify for assistance.

Funding, approved programs, and eligibility vary. A course being available does not mean the office will pay for it—or that completing it will lead to employment.

Before enrolling, ask about approval requirements, covered costs, waiting periods, and any expenses you would bear yourself. Also ask how the proposed training connects to actual employer requirements.

If you need income while developing skills, discuss apprenticeships or other work-based routes. Our article **“Apprenticeships: How to Earn While You Learn”** provides questions to help evaluate those opportunities.

Explain Immediate Needs and Longer-Term Goals

Career planning takes time, but bills may require a faster response. Tell the representative if you need work promptly.

Ask whether you can develop two connected plans: one for immediate employment and another for moving toward your preferred occupation. Temporary or transitional work may help support a longer-term effort.

Also mention practical obstacles that affect your search. Ask whether the office or a partner organization offers relevant assistance or referrals. Available support will depend on the program and your circumstances.

Understand Why Placement Cannot Be Guaranteed

Employment services can help you prepare and connect with opportunities, but employers make hiring decisions. Local vacancies, competition, qualifications, and timing all affect the outcome.

That does not mean the service has no responsibility to be useful. You can reasonably ask for clear explanations, relevant guidance, and follow-through on agreed referrals.

If a recommendation seems unsuitable, explain why and ask about alternatives. If the office cannot provide what you need, request a referral to a service that may be better equipped to help.

Arrive Prepared and Leave With Next Steps

Bring your résumé, a summary of your work and education, and a few announcements for jobs that interest you. Note the questions you want answered and any restrictions affecting your availability.

Before leaving, confirm:

- The occupations or openings you will investigate.
- The applications, assessments, or workshops you will complete.
- Any referrals or information the representative will provide.
- Deadlines and the method for following up.

Keep brief notes and report back on what happened. If a plan is not producing useful results, discuss what should change.

The representative's opening statement remains a good starting point: understand the role before judging the service. Public employment assistance is most useful when clear expectations lead to specific actions—and when both you and the representative know what comes next.