

## Government/Federal Pharmacists

### Background

Pharmacists in government/federal pharmacy are employees of local, state, or federal government agencies. These could include government units such as municipal health clinics, state Medicaid agencies, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), branches of the U.S. Military including the Army, Navy, and Air Force, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), and other related organizations. The PHS oversees a number of agencies, including, but not limited to, the Coast Guard, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the Indian Health Service (IHS), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

Government/federal pharmacists may be considered active military or have a civilian appointment depending on their place of employment and their position held. Opportunities for pharmacists in the government are varied and cover a wide scope of practices including clinical, research, and administrative roles. In accord with their practice settings, these pharmacists exhibit considerable diversity in their duties and responsibilities. The broad range includes providing direct patient care through MTM services, dispensing and other drug-related activities, managing and administering pharmacy departments within their government branch, reviewing new drug applications and health administration, and many others. A focus on local, state, and national emergency preparedness is another component of some positions in this field.

Seventeen percent of their time is spent on business/organization/department management. Only 12% of their time is spent on medication dispensing (including associated patient counseling). Project/case management takes 11% of federal pharmacists' time and medication management and patient management services comprise of 8% of their time each.

### Characteristics

A total of 137 pharmacists responded to the 2012 *APhA Career Pathway Evaluation Program* survey in this area. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents have a bachelor of pharmacy degree and sixty-three percent have either an entry level or post BS PharmD degree. Fourteen percent held a non-pharmacy baccalaureate and 50% had an advanced degree (MA, MS, MBA, PhD, or other.) Also, 27% report completing a residency, 7% completed a fellowship, and another 42% completed some type of certificate training. Thirteen percent reported completing other training.

The respondents' average age was 45 years old. Slightly over half of the respondents (53%) were male. Over half of the respondents (61%) reported that they are in management positions. Annual income data indicated that 24% have an income less than \$100,000. Fifty-three percent had an income of \$100,000 - \$130,000 in 2011. The majority of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with their work, with 51% indicating they are "extremely satisfied" and 39% indicating "somewhat satisfied." Over half of the pharmacists (52%) find their career "extremely challenging" and another 38% responded "somewhat challenging."

**Insider's Perspective****What aspects of the job are most appealing?**

Many of the government/federal pharmacy respondents report that flexibility in the work schedule and hours are the most appealing facet of their work. Some respondents indicated that this impacts their quality of life in a positive way. Other positive aspects included the diversity of daily activities, the opportunity to serve, living overseas, opportunities outside of pharmacy, and working with patients and other professionals. Many also stated an appreciation for the opportunity to serve the country and our veterans. One respondent appreciated that “The work we do as public health pharmacists affects a population as opposed to individuals in the classical pharmacy setting.”

**What aspects of the job are least appealing?**

Many of the respondents indicated the “bureaucracy” was the least appealing aspect of their work. Although some cited travel opportunities as most appealing, others found this to be the least appealing aspect. Notably, there were several respondents who answered “none” or “nothing,” for this question.

**What advice should students and practitioners consider when selecting the option of government/federal pharmacy?**

One pharmacist stressed the importance of thinking through the decision carefully with the following advice: “Regarding military service it is said that the individual makes the decision to join, but the family makes the decision to stay. Military service is a noble calling but it is not for everyone. If you have interest in joining the military, you will be referred to speak with a health professions recruiter, but more importantly, make contact with a military pharmacist for more information and details.” Another echoed the effect this decision can have on the whole family: “Be ready to be challenged and have family on board since the entire family serves together.” Another pharmacist advised: “Be willing to try new roles and reach beyond your comfort level. There are no limits to what you can do as a pharmacist in federal healthcare. Be willing to develop new skills outside of traditional pharmacy roles.”

The importance of communication skills were mentioned by several commenters including this one: “Public Health Service pharmacists in Indian Health Service must be very career oriented to succeed. They should be interested in participating in the PHS organization and in moving the profession forward. To be successful in IHS, I believe a pharmacist must be very good at communicating with other healthcare professionals and with patients. We are called upon to be innovative and dedicated to work in remote areas serving an underserved population. This is a challenging and rewarding career path, but it shouldn't be entered into without forethought.” There are several opportunities for students and new practitioners to explore different types of practice environments in the government arena. The PHS offers internships that usually range from 30 days to 6 months. They also offer the Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (COSTEP). Through COSTEP, students have the opportunity to become commissioned officers for up to 120 days, thus enabling them to experience the opportunities offered by a PHS career.

Adapted from the American Pharmacists Association