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THE INTERNSHIP IMPERATIVE

Building Pathways
into Public Service

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THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE

Empowering and Inspiring Public Servants

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This paper draws on a panel convened by the Volcker Alliance and John Jay College of Criminal Justice on November 19, 2025, as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge Future Leaders Initiative. The convening brought together initiative grantees, educators, government employers, and other stakeholders working to strengthen pathways into public service.

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INTRODUCTION

Government faces a workforce crisis. Experienced workers are retiring faster than agencies can replace them, and state and local positions sit unfilled for months or years. These gaps are not abstract: They imperil emergency response, delay permits and infrastructure, strain health care systems, and undercut basic public services.

At the same time, the pipeline of young talent into government has slowed to a trickle. State and local government workforces are significantly older than the broader labor force, with relatively few employees at the beginning of their careers pursuing work in public service. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the median age of the public-service workforce is 45.6, older than nearly every other industry in the United States.¹ As the pipeline has atrophied, governments have further reduced their reliance on full-time, early-career professionals, compounding the crisis.

These trends carry consequences. Generation Z—despite its strong values orientation—is skeptical of government as a vehicle for change: Only 37 percent view working in government as effective, and nearly half say they would not even consider a government career.² This disconnect threatens government’s ability to deliver.

Without a bench of early-career professionals, agencies cannot plan for leadership succession, and institutional knowledge disappears with every retirement. What follows is a deficit in both capacity and credibility. Government needs technological fluency, and younger workers are native adopters of tools like artificial intelligence, which agencies need to modernize service delivery. But the stakes go beyond operational capacity. When the only young people who enter public service are those with existing connections—a parent in government or a well-placed mentor—agencies become less representative of the communities they serve and less capable of earning and sustaining public trust.

Governments must recommit to deepening early-career talent pipelines and incorporating rising leaders into their workforce. A renewed commitment to public-sector internships is one of the most promising approaches available to accomplish that.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employed and Experienced Unemployed Persons by Detailed Industry, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity," Current Population Survey, Table 18b.

² Francisco Miguel Araiza, Cathy J. Cohen, and Emma Vadehra, "Disconnected and Skeptical: Young Adults' Views of Government," Next100/GenForward, April 12, 2022 (survey respondents were ages 18–36); Caroline Whistler and Tony Gherardini, "Transforming Workplace Culture to Attract Gen Z to the Public Sector," Stanford Social Innovation Review, December 11, 2024.

But significant obstacles stand in the way, from fragmented hiring systems and unpaid positions to rigid civil service rules that discourage intern-to-employee conversion. Many of the barriers to effective public-sector internship programs can be addressed through strategic collaboration between government employers and the universities that are the sources of student talent. This paper presents five replicable strategies for government and university stakeholders to strengthen internships and bolster the early-career pipeline into government.

FIVE STRATEGIES

1. Seamlessly Connect Government Employers with Internship Candidates
2. Support Students Before, During, and After Their Government Internship
3. Provide Academic Credit for Internship Completion
4. Streamline Hiring to Convert Interns into Full-Time Employees
5. Pay Them

STRATEGY 1

Seamlessly Connect Government Employers with Internship Candidates

“It’s easy to recruit internship sites when you say, ‘Hey, we’re going to provide you with an intern, and we’re going to pay them.’”

State and local governments are not each a single employer but rather hundreds of agencies, departments, and offices, each with its own budget, personnel system, and hiring timeline. Administering an internship program means recruiting candidates, preparing onboarding materials and programming, managing payroll, and supervising students. Few government agencies have the staff or budget to do all of this on their own.

Universities can help solve this problem by stepping in to build the connective infrastructure that makes internships viable for government agencies at scale. The University of Baltimore’s NextGen Leaders for Public Service, an initiative of the Schaefer Center for Public Policy at the College of Public Affairs, shows what’s possible when a university unlocks public funding and devotes staff to matching students with government employers.

Dr. Roger Hartley, then dean of the College of Public Affairs, and Dr. Ann Cotten, executive

director of the Schaefer Center, led the effort alongside their team at the University of Baltimore. They expanded access to paid internships by engaging the Maryland General Assembly with a simple observation: 10-percent vacancy rates across some state agencies meant budgeted salaries sitting idle. The ask—\$1.5 million to pay interns \$15 per hour—represented a fraction of what agencies were already authorized to spend on vacant positions. The legislature concurred. In April 2024, the General Assembly appropriated \$1.5 million to the Schaefer Center to build its pipeline to public service through paid internships, free access to the Maryland Certified Public Manager® program, and applied research.³

In addition to its direct engagement of the Maryland legislature, the university shouldered the administrative burden of a statewide paid internship program. The university manages the funds, drives student recruitment, matches candidates to state government employers, and runs payroll. Government agencies are connected with prepared, paid interns but incur no overhead.

The Schaefer Center also built an online portal where agencies post openings and students apply for placements that match their interests. The value proposition for host sites is straightforward. “It’s easy to recruit internship sites when you say, ‘Hey, we’re going to provide you with an intern, and we’re going to pay them,’” Hartley notes.

Since 2022, the program has placed more than 630 interns across more than 80 government host sites—including 45 state agencies, 32 local governments, and 6 municipalities—totaling more than 103,000 paid hours of public service.⁴ For Cotten, “the NextGen program represents a powerful investment in the future of Maryland’s public-sector workforce, preparing talented, motivated professionals to meet the challenges of tomorrow.”

STRATEGY 2

Support Students Before, During, and After Their Government Internship

“We are very intentional about selecting the internship sites and not just sending our students out into the field and saying, ‘Good luck, let us know how it goes.’”

³ Maryland House Appropriations Committee, Report of the House Appropriations Committee to the Maryland House of Delegates: 2025 Session, House Bill 350.

⁴ University of Baltimore, “University of Baltimore’s NextGen Leaders for Public Service Surpass 100,000 Hours of Dedicated Service to Maryland,” UBalt News, February 22, 2026.

For government employers, partnering with a college or university can dramatically strengthen an internship program. Students, most of whom have never worked in a professional setting, need structured preparation, on-the-job support, and guidance on what comes next. Universities can support government employers by providing wraparound support to student interns, positioning them for success on the job and, ultimately, in a full-time career in public service.

John Jay College’s Future of Public Safety Scholars is a year-long program that prepares students for careers in public safety and ensures they are ready to succeed from Day 1.

In the fall, selected student scholars take a course on public-safety careers and are joined by weekly public-service speakers. One scholar recalled that hearing directly from working professionals “made public-service jobs feel accessible. I could envision myself in those jobs.” In the spring, students complete an internship at a John Jay research center, with résumé preparation and interview coaching built in. This “internal” placement allows students to build professional skills in a lower-stakes environment before entering a government workplace. In the summer, they move to a full-time, paid internship placement, carefully matched to their interests and talents.

The program selects internship sites deliberately and establishes formal agreements with each host agency. “We are very intentional about selecting the internship sites and not just sending our students out into the field and saying, ‘Good luck, let us know how it goes,’” explains Erica Bond, vice president of Justice Initiatives at John Jay. “There’s a real expectation around what the employer is going to be doing and how they should be supporting our students.”

Jessica Torres presented her own policy proposal on gun violence prevention directly to Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg and his senior team during her internship. She later joined the DA’s office full-time as a paralegal. Rosman Garcia found similar success. “Being the first generation to go to college, coming from an immigrant family, I didn’t have those resources,” Garcia explains. “When I first learned what the program offered, that was exactly what I was looking for—training in the skills I needed to become ready for my career.” Garcia converted his internship into a full-time position as a Crime Victims Advocate at the Suffolk County District Attorney’s office following graduation.

STRATEGY 3

Provide Academic Credit for Internship Completion

“Students no longer had to choose between earning a living, progressing through their degree program, or gaining valuable career experience. We did it all in one shot.”

To incentivize student participation in time-intensive internships, government internship programs can partner with universities to offer academic credit toward degree requirements.

The Texas Legislative Internship Program (TLIP) demonstrates the power of this approach. Founded in 1990 by then State Senator and current Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis, the program has placed nearly 1,000 students in the Texas legislature and local government agencies.⁵ Every odd year, when the legislature convenes for its 140-day session from January through late May, TLIP brings students to Austin, where they are assigned to individual state legislators and work alongside staff. Students draft legislation, prepare hearing materials, and engage with constituents while earning six to fifteen academic credit hours and receiving stipends of up to \$11,000. In even years, the program places students with county and municipal government agencies.

Commissioner Ellis partnered with Texas Southern University and the University of Texas School of Law to secure academic credit for TLIP participation from the start. “Real-world legislative experience is inherently educational,” he argues, “some might say even more than reading a textbook for class.”

Texas Southern University changed its policy first, helping catalyze TLIP enrollment. The program became so attractive that, as Ellis recalls, “students from the University of Texas would transfer to Texas Southern just to participate in TLIP.” The University of Texas eventually followed, granting up to six hours of credit.

By combining pay with academic recognition, TLIP eliminated a long-standing barrier to experiential learning. “With TLIP,” says Ellis, “students no longer had to choose between earning a living, progressing through their degree program, or gaining valuable career experience. We did it all in one shot.”

⁵ Panel transcript, Safety and Justice Challenge Future Leaders Convening, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, November 19, 2025.

STRATEGY 4

Streamline Hiring to Convert Interns into Full-Time Employees

“Interns who’ve proven themselves during their internship placement can move to full-time employment in a fraction of the time.”

An internship program is only as strong as the hiring pathway that follows it. Traditional civil service rules—exams, ranked lists, extended waiting periods—can stand in the way of converting promising interns into permanent employees. Many government agencies invest in training students and identify strong candidates through internships, only to lose them to employers with faster, more transparent hiring processes.

New York State’s Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS) offers a model for what’s possible when an agency rethinks hiring from the ground up. DCJS leverages NY HELPS, Governor Kathy Hochul’s initiative to eliminate civil service exams for most entry-level titles. Importantly, this reform does not abandon the merit principle that underpins civil service. Candidates still must demonstrate relevant qualifications through their education and experience. What changes is how merit is assessed. Instead of a written exam followed by months of waiting, the process evaluates candidates on their actual qualifications and moves them forward quickly.

Under the traditional system, even an exceptional intern faced a gauntlet of bureaucratic steps: waiting for a civil service exam to be scheduled, taking the exam, waiting for results, waiting to be placed on a ranked list, and then waiting again to be called from that list with no guarantee of when, or if, their number would come up. Agencies watched helplessly as this timeline stretched on, making it nearly impossible to capitalize on the relationship they had built with talented potential hires.

Under NY HELPS, when DCJS identifies an intern they want to hire, the applicant submits a résumé, the agency verifies minimum qualifications, and qualified candidates move directly to interviews. “Now in New York,” explains DCJS Executive Deputy Commissioner Joe Popcun, “interns who’ve proven themselves during their internship placement can move to full-time employment in a fraction of the time.” This streamlined process allows DCJS to treat internships as opportunities to assess fit and capability and then move quickly to

secure a talented candidate before private-sector competitors do. NY HELPS is a reminder of why internships are a central talent tool across the whole economy: to trial candidates in a low-risk way and hire seamlessly to fill pressing needs.

STRATEGY 5

Pay Them

“An elite experience should not be reserved only for students from elite backgrounds.”

Unpaid internships are common in government. Yet when internships are unpaid, the pool of talent exploring public-service careers is constricted. The result is a narrower pipeline that favors privilege and connection rather than interest, public-service values, and talent. When government internships are unpaid while private-sector equivalents offer competitive wages, fewer students will consider opportunities in public service at all.

Adequate pay is the single most important lever for expanding who gets to participate in government internships. When programs commit to paying interns a livable wage, they open the door wider and fundamentally change who walks through it.

“An elite experience should not be reserved only for students from elite backgrounds,” argues Hartley. “Our students cannot afford to take an unpaid internship. What that means is public-service leaders are getting internship candidates who are usually from higher socioeconomic status.”

Commissioner Ellis has found that framing internship compensation as a long-term investment resonates with funders. “The students who serve as legislative interns are future leaders of our state,” he says. “When I go to Texas philanthropies, I explain that by providing impact-oriented students a deep, meaningful exposure to the legislative process, they are making an investment in smart governance ten sessions from now.” TLIP pairs state appropriations with philanthropic support to provide its stipend of up to \$11,000, up from \$2,000 when the program began.

Bond notes that many students do not have the luxury of going to school without working at the same time. “How can we expect our talented rising leaders to set aside their financial obligations to make concrete progress toward stable careers? Not only should we pay a

living wage to student interns who are exploring public service—we should offer them premium pay because government needs their talent, commitment, and ingenuity more than ever.”

CONCLUSION

Government needs talent, and students need career pathways. Internships can connect the two when they are designed with intention, funded adequately, and structured to support students at every stage. The programs featured in this paper demonstrate what is possible when universities and government agencies commit to expanding access to internships and experiential learning for rising leaders. These programs are not only making government jobs more accessible—they are making government itself more representative, responsive, and worthy of the public’s confidence.

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