Legal Occupations in New Mexico

Less than 1 percent of all jobs in New Mexico (0.7 percent) are classified as legal occupations by the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system (as of 2012). The SOC system identifies legal workers as lawyers; judicial law clerks; administrative law judges, adjudicators, and hearing officers; arbitrators, mediators, and conciliators; judges, magistrate judges, and magistrates; paralegals and legal assistants; court reporters; title examiners, abstractors, and searchers; and other legal support workers. Other related occupations, such as postsecondary law teachers and legal secretaries, are classified under other occupational groups fitting the tasks of these professions.

Employment in this occupational group in New Mexico is smaller than most other surrounding states and the country as a whole. In 2012, 0.79 percent of U.S. workers were employed in a legal occupation. The states with the highest concentrations of legal workers include the District of Columbia, New York, Delaware, Florida, and Virginia. Of the southwestern states shown in Exhibit 1, Colorado has the largest concentration of legal workers, with 0.94 percent of all workers employed in a legal occupation. Colorado is followed by Oklahoma and Arizona, with 0.80 and 0.74 percent, respectively. Texas has the smallest concentration of legal employment, with 0.67 percent of all workers employed in a legal occupation.

The average annual wage for all legal occupations in New Mexico also trails those of surrounding states. At $74,620, New Mexico’s average annual wage is almost $25,000 less than that of Colorado, which is the highest paying southwestern state at $99,610 a year, and around $13,000 less than the U.S. average of $88,090 a year. The difference in wage is likely due in large part to differences in cost of living estimates, although other factors may also play a part in the difference.

Where Workers Are Employed

Based on 2012 data, over 60 percent of all legal workers were located in the Central Region of New Mexico. With about 43 percent of New Mexico’s residents living in the Central Region, the number of legal workers is driven by the population. While the Central Region has the largest number of legal workers, the Santa Fe
MSA has the largest concentration of legal workers in the state and is ranked tenth in the nation for concentration of legal workers in metropolitan areas. As shown in Exhibit 2, approximately 1.32 percent of the workforce is employed in a legal occupation. Santa Fe’s high concentration of legal workers is likely driven, at least in part, by the high government employment in the capital. The Albuquerque MSA/Central Region has the second highest concentration of legal workers, with 0.93 percent of the workforce in a legal occupation. The remaining MSAs and non-MSA regions follow distantly, with legal workers comprising anywhere from 0.24 percent to 0.44 percent of the total workforce in each area.

Average annual wages for legal occupations in each area of the state vary; Santa Fe tops the list with an average wage of $95,490 (see Exhibit 3). The Farmington MSA, which has the lowest concentration of legal workers (0.24 percent of total employment), is the second highest-paying area in the state, with an average annual wage of $82,290. The Southwestern Region and the Las Cruces MSA, separately, pay the least of all areas in the state ($56,570 and $36,380, respectively).

### Employment in Specific Legal Occupations

As shown in Exhibits 4 and 5, close to 85 percent of all legal workers in the state, or 4,580, are either lawyers or paralegals/legal assistants. Over half of all legal workers in the state are lawyers, with about 700 persons for every lawyer in the state. This number is higher than most surrounding states, except Arizona. Lawyers are also the highest paying legal occupation, with workers in this profession making $99,490 a year, on average, statewide. The remaining six occupations comprise the balance of employment (note that employment of court reporters is suppressed). Wages range from $38,890 for title examiners to $88,490 for arbitrators, mediators, and conciliators.

### Legal Jobs in New Mexico’s Industries

Legal occupations are found in 16 of the 20 major industries in the state. Exhibit 6 shows that in 2012, the majority of legal workers (59.9 percent) were employed in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry. This is not surprising, considering that law firms fall within this industry. Additionally, 15.6 percent of all legal workers are unpaid family workers or, self-employed, as is
likely more common. The remaining industries with the largest number of legal workers include all three government groups (local, state, and federal), and the finance and insurance industry.

Lawyers, which comprise the largest percentage of legal professionals, are also mostly employed in the professional, scientific, and technical services industry; about 64 percent of lawyers are employed at establishments in the industry (see Exhibit 7). Close to 22 percent of lawyers are self-employed (or classified as unpaid family workers), while around 11 percent are employed in some level of government.

The industries with the largest number of legal workers are often the same industries that have a high concentration of legal workers among their total employment. This includes professional, scientific, and technical services, where 6 percent of the workforce is employed in a legal occupation, and finance and insurance, where 1.4 percent of the total workforce is employed in a legal job.

**Employment Growth in the Legal Professions**

The 2010-2020 employment projections indicate that legal occupations are projected to grow by about 0.4 percent annually, or by about 210 jobs, between 2010 and 2020. This rate is slower than the 1.6 percent projected for all other occupations. Exhibit 8 shows the number of job openings that are projected to result from job growth versus openings from replacement needs (turnover and retirements) each year during the 10-year period. It is projected that legal occupations will see 120 job openings each year over the period, with the majority of these openings derived from replacement needs. Lawyers and paralegals/legal assistants are projected to see stable employment growth over the period and the largest number of annual openings of all legal professions, with 70 and 30 openings, respectively. The remaining occupations are each projected to see fewer than 10 openings a year.

**Educating New Mexicans for Jobs in Legal Professions**

There are several 2- and 4-year education institutions across New Mexico that offer certificates and/or degrees in legal professions. Exhibit 9 provides a listing of higher-education institutions in the state and Exhibit 10 provides information on the number of program completers for legal professions. The University of New Mexico is the only institution that offers a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B) and Juris Doctor (or Doctorate) degree in the state. Based on information from the New Mexico Department of Higher Education, approximately 100 students completed the program in 2011. In addition, around 275 persons become licensed to practice law in the state each year (numbers vary somewhat from year to year based on information from the New Mexico Board of Bar Examiners).
There are roughly 16 institutions that provide education for the paralegal and legal assistant professions, including three 4-year institutions and 13 2-year institutions. You do not have to be certified or licensed to work as a paralegal in New Mexico. A degree or certificate from a paralegal/legal assistant program, however, can help demonstrate a person's skills in this field. Three national paralegal associations offer voluntary certification programs including the American Alliance of Paralegals (AAPI), the National Association of Legal Assistants (NALA), and the National Federation of Paralegals (NFPA). In addition, Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) is the only New Mexico institution whose paralegal studies program is approved by the American Bar Association (ABA). In 2011, approximately 105 persons earned an associate's degree or postsecondary award, certificate, or diploma in these occupations. Finally, programs for court reporting and other legal studies each graduated six persons in the state.

Graduates of Higher-Education Programs for Legal Occupations - A look at Workforce Supply

Based on employment projections for both lawyers and paralegals, New Mexico institutions are graduating more students each year from law programs than what projections are showing to be available on an annual basis in future years in corresponding jobs. While a one-to-one comparison of projected job openings and program graduates is not possible considering the many assumptions implemented in projections methodology and the overall flow of workers in the job market, it does provide a general idea of workforce supply in coming years. Of course, many new graduates leave New Mexico to practice law in other areas. At the same time, other workers are immigrating to New Mexico to work in legal jobs, as evidenced by the annual licensing data from the NM Board of Bar Examiners. It is important to note, however, that New Mexico's institutions are producing new graduates each year to meet the demand of the labor market for at least several of the legal occupations defined by the BLS SOC system.