

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers

Episode 3: Benefits of Government Careers

[Intro music]

Jamie Morgan: Are you a learner of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, or Russian? Do you have a connection to these languages through your family or community? This is the podcast for you!

[00:30] Hello, and welcome to Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers. We believe in the power of multilingualism, and in this podcast series we'll discuss how your language skills can help you get hired and work successfully in the federal government. By sharing experiences that link language study to potential federal careers, we'll teach you how to leverage your language skills to get a fulfilling job.

I'm your host, Jamie Morgan. Have you ever wondered why heritage learners should consider pursuing [01:00] federal government careers? In this episode we're going to talk about some personal and professional benefits of pursuing this type of career, as well as ways in which you could leverage your experience as a federal worker to positively impact your heritage language community.

Our guests today are Claire Lee and Wei Smith. Claire Lee is a Korean linguist currently working with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as an interpreter. She recently got a job offer from DHS and started a new career as an immigration services officer. [01:30] Wei Smith is a Language Analyst at the Department of Justice. She graduated from the English for Heritage Language Speakers program (EHLS) in 2018 and worked in the private sector briefly before embarking upon a federal government career.

Thanks so much for joining us, and let's get started!

[Transition music]

Jamie: First, can you tell us a little bit about your background and experience working in the federal government? And [02:00] Claire, why don't we start with you?

Claire Lee: Yeah, sure. So, most of my professional experience in the federal government is a language-related field. I have worked with staff at the Defense Language Institute, also known as DLI, as a defense language proficiency test and curriculum developer. In 2020, I worked as a partnership specialist at the Census Bureau and was in charge of providing [02:30] language support to Korean communities.

Right now, I'm working as an interpreter for the Department of Homeland Security. And I'm about to start my new position as an Immigration Services officer at the end of this month.

Jamie: Great, thank you, Claire. And can you tell us about your language background as well?

Claire: Yes. So, I am a native Korean language speaker, and English is my second language and I also speak a little bit of Chinese and Japanese.

Jamie: Great, thank you. [03:00] And Wei, can you also tell us a little about your background and experience in the federal government?

Wei Smith: Sure, happy to. I'm a native Chinese speaker. I speak Mandarin and Cantonese, both fluently, and being a linguist wasn't my choice of career but that's how it led me to become a federal employee.

I was a contractor in the language field for the Department of Justice for a little bit and then [03:30] they want me to convert into a federal employee and that's how I got here. I've worked at different volunteer legal assistance organizations before, and that's how I gained some insight into how courts and the liaison between attorneys and their clients, how they work. And that's what got me interested in working in the field of law enforcement and justice.

Jamie: [04:00] Wonderful, thank you. Well, it's great to have you both here and to hear about your expertise in these different agencies in different areas.

So now let's talk a little bit about what you've gained through your experience as federal workers. What do you like most about working in the federal government and how has this experience contributed to your personal growth, development, or fulfillment?

Wei: Before I became a government employee and before I became a government contractor, I actually worked [04:30] in the private sector in the language field as well for about a year. And I feel like the biggest difference I've encountered is that, in the federal government, there are just so many different opportunities. You're going to be able to get in contact with a lot of very interesting topics that you have no opportunity to even get a glimpse of when you are in the private sector. And the fact that you can communicate with a lot of these clients directly, for me, [05:00] it was a huge plus. Because you can see the impact of your work very, very directly.

Jamie: Thank you. And I'm curious, is there a specific topic or specific experience that you'd like to tell us a little bit more about that you particularly enjoyed?

Wei: If you don't mind traveling [laughs] in COVID times, there are opportunities to travel and one particular part about that I really enjoy, but that I realize is not for everyone, is that you, [05:30] when you get dropped off in a new office or new area, you get to work with a group of people, very dedicated individuals in your field. They're complete strangers to you, but you get to work with them for a few days, learn a lot from them and realize that, hey,

the world is huge. There are just so many different agencies there that are all working together to make America a better place and a safer place.

[06:00] And then you get to work with other partners and experience different people, you know, different places. Most of the places that we go to are not touristy places. So, it's like I was sent to places that I've never thought that I would be before, would visit before. And that's just fun, you know, it's different.

Jamie: Yeah, absolutely. Claire, let's move on to you.

Claire: I think Wei actually covered a lot of things that I wanted to say. The federal employee, [06:30] you get a lot of opportunity for working with different people, traveling to different places and what I find the highest benefit of working for the federal government is that your work is actually really impacting the lives of every American and you know that you are part of making the differences in their life.

And not to mention, government also has really great benefit packages. Because I [07:00] actually went to school multiple times to get a higher degree, I do have some student loan, and [laughs] government has the student loan forgiveness programs for the federal employee.

Jamie: Absolutely, I think those practical considerations are really important as well, so thanks for sharing that.

All right, let's move on to our next question. What about workplace knowledge, skills, and abilities? How has your federal government career helped you develop and grow as a professional?

Claire: So, what I really [07:30] like about federal government agency is that there are so many job opportunities within the government, and I have the advantage of exploring different options.

Wei: I'm still fairly new. I view myself as a very new federal employee and I attended the EHLS program very specifically wanting to join the federal workforce. And so far, I've felt like that the federal [08:00] government has been very supportive in terms of a lot of training and just—anything that's remotely related to our work, they have constantly put up knowledge-based training, training in software, training in subject areas. And if I want, after probation period as an employee ends, I can apply to get a higher degree that's related to my field and the government will pay for [08:30] some of that.

Jamie: Thank you. All right, so now we're going to switch gears a little bit and talk about heritage language communities and the relationship between federal government jobs and these communities.

So, as you know, many heritage language learners have strong ties to their communities, both here and abroad. And we'd love to hear how heritage speakers working in the federal government might support heritage language communities through their work, so any insight you have from maybe a personal [09:00] experience or experiences of your colleagues.

Wei: As an immigrant myself, who immigrated to the United States as an adult, I understand very personally the struggles and also the strengths of immigrants and heritage language speakers. And that puts me in a very good position in my work to provide insights into our culture, [09:30] into our community, and that in turn helps me in my work.

I've been asked to share my culture, to help others understand where we—as Chinese Americans—where we are coming from and bringing in our perspective and I take it as an honor to be able to share my insight, my heritage with others. Maybe, hopefully some of what I tell them will stick with them and then they will [10:00] take it to their work and back to their community.

And as we witnessed in the past two years in the pandemic, there was a lot of incidents that involved Asian hate. And it's—obviously it's very hurtful to the Asian community. And being where I am in the federal government, I was able to help with a lot of either the policies or the publications to advertise what [10:30] the federal government is doing to combat hate crimes, and that's just an incredible honor to me to make a difference in my community.

Claire: So, for me, I work with multiple contractors for many years, and I'm still in contact with the recruiters and managers that I used to work with. And they often contact me whenever there is a new government project and ask me to refer them to someone if [11:00] I'm not able to work. And since I'm a member of Korean language-related associations, I know some individuals who are looking for new career opportunities and I usually refer them to the recruiters and managers.

So, I'll say my way of supporting my community is by introducing them to the authorities in charge of hiring for government projects and eventually they will also get [11:30] different opportunities from that point. So, it's more like a practical support I can provide to the people in my community.

Jamie: Thank you for sharing. All right, so some heritage speakers who work for the federal government could potentially be worried about how their work is perceived by or impacts their communities. Did either of you have these concerns when you started working in the federal government? If so, how did you navigate these concerns? And if you didn't have them, what [12:00] recommendations might you give to those who do have such concerns?

Claire: Yes, so for me, I think in general, working for the federal government is perceived very favorable. So I never really worried about how my work will be perceived by or impact my communities or had any other concern.

I haven't really thought about the advice, but if I could give, do not be afraid of what you do for the country, [12:30] because in the end the work of federal government is to support the people that is in the country and your community in this country is also being supported by the government.

Jamie: Absolutely. And I think some of the examples you both gave to our previous question are certainly tangible things, benefits that someone could speak to if they were trying to counteract some of those negative perceptions. Wei?

Wei: Actually, I do have [13:00] concerns and due to the fact that I work for the Department of Justice and the Chinese community, and I think a lot of communities too, generally have a suspicion, okay, let's just put it that way, of larger government organizations, agencies. And this is probably fear from dealing with our own government before we came to the United States, but also a lot of it has to do with the misunderstanding [13:30] and also a lack of knowledge of what's going on.

I know very well that the more I worked here, the more I realized that for the most part that the government really is trying to uphold many values, American values that we hold dear, equal rights and human rights and all these civil rights. So, when I meet a member from my community, I want to absolutely make sure they understand that the government is not targeting that community.

[14:00] I think the last thing the federal government wants to do is to make their people feel like they're being oppressed. And I think that it's very important for us as heritage speakers in the federal government to make sure that the government hears us. So that's a thing that I think that I'm trying to do, to help the heritage language community to not be so fearful of the government and to understand that we're here to help. We're not here to [14:30] hurt you. We're really here to help all Americans.

Jamie: Yeah, thank you, Wei. I think those are excellent points. And I think that just really demonstrates how being a heritage speaker in the federal government allows you to sort of serve as a liaison between the government and your community.

All right, so are there any additional benefits beyond what we've talked about already to pursuing federal government careers, specifically those in which you can use your language skills? Anything that we haven't [15:00] covered?

Wei: For—specifically for—heritage speakers, it's just being the bridge, being the liaison between your culture and the government, the U.S. government, that you are making a direct impact and influence into the government's day-to-day life, and you bring in your insights, you bring in your background into this federal work.

Jamie: Absolutely, thank you. And Claire, [15:30] are there any additional benefits that we haven't covered today from you that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Claire: Yes, sure. So, pursuing a government career using language actually will open up the door for more career options that you'll be qualified for.

And it's also a skill that will make you more competitive compared to other candidates. Some agencies actually pay extra bonus for speaking a foreign language. So, [16:00] when you apply, that is something you might want to check with the interviewers.

Jamie: Well, thank you both so much for sharing all of your thoughts, your experiences. This has been very encouraging, very informative for our listeners, so thank you so much.

[transition music]

Jamie: Well, that's all for today's episode of the Language Pathways Podcast! Thanks for joining us, and a big thank you to our [16:30] guests for sharing their thoughts on the personal, professional, and community benefits of pursuing a federal government career. Let's sum things up.

Both of our guests talked about the variety of career options in the federal government, and how one federal job often leads to others. They also talked about the great professional development available to federal employees. In terms of community benefits, they spoke about how they can bridge immigrant communities and the federal government, showing how government agencies exist to benefit everyone.

[17:00] In the next episode, we'll continue to build connections between language learning and federal careers by discussing how different language varieties, dialects, and registers can be used in government jobs.

To continue on your journey through federal career pathways for heritage language learners, check out the other episodes in this series. You can also find the resources we discussed and additional links in the episode description and on our website. Thanks for joining us and see you next time! [17:30]

Language Pathways: Connecting Heritage Learners to Federal Careers was created and produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics. This podcast is one component of a project funded by the National Security Agency to develop and share materials highlighting federal career opportunities for heritage language learners of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Russian. [18:00]

[Outro music]