



**New York State
Department of Civil Service**

Committed to Innovation, Quality and Excellence

**Civil Service Examinations
How To Take
A
Written Test**



David A. Paterson
Governor

Nancy G. Groenwegen
Commissioner

Civil Service Examinations

How To Take A Written Test

This booklet applies in general to written tests for entry-level civil service jobs in New York State and local government.

Why A Test?

The New York State Constitution states that public employees must be hired for jobs on the basis of merit and fitness. The constitution also says that, for most jobs, merit and fitness must be measured by examination.

In practical terms, hiring employees on the basis of *merit and fitness* means hiring people who will be able to do the jobs well. New York State and local governments are no different from private companies. Employers want to hire the best candidates for the jobs.

There are several ways to find good candidates. When private companies hire, they ask candidates about previous work experience, they look at resumes and school records, and they sometimes give tests.

New York State and local governments also use tests when they hire. All New York State civil service examinations include one or more tests which are designed to determine how people will perform on certain aspects of the job. *Written* and *oral tests* present questions and problems that test candidates for the critical knowledge, skills, and abilities needed on the job. *Training and Experience* examinations are used to evaluate candidates' possession of the training and experience required to perform the job. *Performance tests* measure candidates' ability to perform job-related tasks, such as typing or entering computer data.

All civil service examinations are based on the jobs to be filled. Examinations provide a system that is fair and objective. Every candidate for a particular examination answers the same questions or performs the same task and receives a score or scores based on the same factors. This gives all candidates a fair chance to get the jobs, and helps New York State and local governments to find the people best able to do the jobs. This is the reason New York State uses the examination and testing process to fill its state and local civil service jobs.

How To Find Out About Civil Service Examinations



Announcements are published for all New York State and local (municipal) civil service examinations. You can find out what New York State civil service examinations are coming up by checking with the New York State Department of Civil Service. You can find out about local civil service examinations and applications by contacting the municipal civil service agency in the locality of interest. Examination announcements may also be available at local libraries, New York State Department of Labor Community Service Centers, or placement offices. New York State civil service examination announcements and applications are available on the New York State Department of Civil Service Website at <http://www.cs.state.ny.us>. The New York State Department of Civil Service Website also lists the address of each municipal civil service agency in New York State.

What A Civil Service Examination Announcement Tells You

When you pick up a New York State or local civil service examination announcement, you should *read it carefully*. The examination announcement will tell you:

- the job titles involved
- the salaries of the titles involved
- the date of the test
- the date by which examination applications must be postmarked
- whether the examination is open competitive or for promotion
- the minimum qualifications (education and/or experience) to take the examination
- the positions (a description of where the jobs exist or are located)

- the duties (a description of the duties of the job)
- the subjects of examination:
 - whether the test will be written, oral, performance, etc.
 - what subject areas the test will cover
- how to apply
- residency requirements (if any)
- additional information about:
 - admission to the examination
 - religious accommodation
 - reasonable accommodations in testing
 - if multiple examinations are scheduled for the same day
- the processing or application fee (if any) and how the fee may be paid

When you read an examination announcement, you should:

Find out what the job is about.

In the examples which follow, we will look at an imaginary examination announcement for *Compensation Claims Clerk*.

Here are *The Positions* and *Duties* statements for the *Compensation Claims Clerk*:

The Positions: *These positions exist in the New York State Department of Labor, State Insurance Fund in Albany, Buffalo, Hempstead, New York City, Rochester, and Syracuse. Most positions and vacancies are in New York City.*

Duties: *As a Compensation Claims Clerk, you would perform responsible clerical work in the development and processing of workers' compensation and disability benefits claims cases. Under supervision, you would organize and determine priority of claims bills; pay certain bills; review claim files; consult appropriate manuals, guidelines, and schedules to determine if treatment is reasonable; verify ratings and compute allowable fees; complete vouchers; and respond to inquiries by doctors, billing offices, and claimants concerning the status of bills. You would also recommend arbitration of disputed fees when appropriate.*

This information should help you decide whether you want to be a Compensation Claims Clerk.

To be a Compensation Claims Clerk, you should like to:

- work with numbers (*pay bills; complete vouchers*)
- read to obtain information (*review claim files; consult appropriate manuals, guidelines, and schedules to determine if treatment is reasonable*)
- keep records and make routine decisions (*organize and determine the priority of claims bills; recommend arbitration of disputed fees*)

Think about the kinds of things you like to do. If the duties listed on an examination announcement sound interesting to you, you should read further.

Find out whether you qualify for the examination.

Most examinations require a candidate to meet certain minimum qualifications. The minimum qualifications tell you the kind of background you must have in order to take the examination. Because each examination has its own specific minimum qualifications, it is extremely important that you read the minimum qualifications on the examination announcement carefully, to be sure you qualify for the examination.

For example, here are the *Minimum Qualifications* for *Compensation Claims Clerk*:

Minimum Qualifications: On or before the date of the written test, candidates must meet the following requirements:

Either

possession of a high school diploma or a high school equivalency diploma issued by an appropriate educational authority;

or

four years of office, business, industrial, or other work experience which involved public contact; or military experience. Each completed year of high school study (grades 9-12) may be substituted for one year of work experience.

For many civil service examinations, there may be more than one way to meet the minimum qualifications. For example, to qualify for the *Compensation Claims Clerk* examination, a person could have either a high school diploma or four years of the listed work experience. A person could also have two years of high school study and two years of the listed work experience to qualify.

Education requirements will differ. Some examinations may not require any specific education, while others may require advanced degrees.

Find out if there is a residency requirement.

Examinations for some positions may have residency requirements that candidates must meet in order to be eligible to take the test or be appointed.

Find out if there is an application fee.

Many examinations require you to pay a non-refundable processing or application fee.

Find out about the subjects of examination.

For example, here are the *Subjects of Examination* for *Compensation Claims Clerk*:

Subjects of Examination: *There will be a written test that candidates must pass in order to be considered for appointment. The written test will be designed to test for knowledge, skills and/or abilities in such areas as:*

- *Arithmetic computation*
- *Arithmetic reasoning*
- *Understanding and interpreting written material*
- *Office record-keeping*

What does the information above tell you?

First, the examination for ***Compensation Claims Clerk*** involves a written test.

Second, the written test for ***Compensation Claims Clerk*** will cover four subject areas: arithmetic computation, arithmetic reasoning, understanding and interpreting written material and office record-keeping. (Often, each subject area on an examination announcement will be followed by a paragraph that describes, in more detail, what may be covered in that subject area.)

People hired to be Compensation Claims Clerks must have enough knowledge, skills, and abilities in these subject areas to do the job. These are critical areas of the job. They may not be the only critical areas of the job, but they are the only ones that will be covered by the written test for Compensation Claims Clerk.

Once you determine that you are interested in the job, meet the minimum qualifications for the job, and wish to take the examination for the job, you should apply for the examination.

How To Apply for the Examination

The examination announcement will tell you, under **How To Apply**, the examination application form required, where to get it, and how to file it. Once you have the correct form, fill it out carefully, accurately, completely, and neatly. Read all parts and fill out all of those that apply to you.

The information you provide must show that you meet the **minimum qualifications** required to take the test. Therefore, it is important that you answer all questions and provide clear and complete information about your relevant education and experience.

Reasonable accommodations in testing can be arranged for people with disabilities. If you need reasonable accommodations to take the test, you should indicate this on your application for the examination. You must also directly contact the civil service agency that announced the examination (the NYS Department of Civil Service for State

examinations or the local civil service agency for local examinations) to describe the accommodations you need. You will be required to produce documentation to prove that you are eligible for reasonable accommodations in testing.

Alternate test date arrangements are also available for Sabbath observers, persons on active military duty, and persons taking examinations for more than one civil service jurisdiction on the same date.

War-time disabled veterans, war-time veterans, and persons on full-time active duty (other than for training) are eligible to have extra credits added to their examination score, if they pass. In most instances, these extra credits can be used only once for any permanent government appointment in New York State. If you want to have the extra credits added to your examination score, you must answer the appropriate questions on the application form. You will be required to produce documentation, such as discharge papers, to prove that you are eligible for veterans credits.

On the application form, there is a place to sign a statement which affirms that all the information you have given is accurate. This is your **legal affirmation** that the statements on your application are true.

You will be required to pay an **application fee** to take most examinations. Information on the amount of the fee and how it can be paid will be found on the announcement. If some applicants are eligible to have the required fee waived, the announcement will explain the requirements for a waiver.

Follow the instructions for completing your application and submit the application by the date shown on the announcement. It is advisable to keep a photocopy of your application along with the examination announcement for your records.

Mark the test date on your calendar!

Your Admission Notice



Approximately one week before the test date, you will receive an admission notice for the test. The admission notice will tell you the date, time, and place of the test, and will list

the examination numbers of the tests you are scheduled to take on that test date. You will have to present this notice at the test center, so be sure to save it. The admission notice will also tell you if you should bring anything to the test, such as sharpened No. 2 pencils, a calculator, or a quiet lunch.

The admission notice will also tell you that you must bring identification to the test center. The identification must show your name, signature, and photograph. A driver's license or a picture ID will do. If you have not received an admission notice by the Wednesday before the test date, or if you lose your admission notice, you should call the New York State or municipal civil service department that announced the examination to find out what you should do.

How To Prepare For The Test



In most cases, you will have some time between when you apply for an examination and the date of the test. You can use this time to prepare yourself for taking the test so that you can do your best on the test date. The next sections of this booklet will give you some general test-taking guidelines that should be helpful.

The following information applies to civil service multiple-choice tests, although some of the information may be helpful in preparing for an oral test or a performance test as well.

Preparing For The Test

Most New York State civil service examinations include a multiple-choice test. The examination announcement will list the ***Subjects of Examination*** that the test will cover. Use this information to help prepare for the test.

For example, the ***Subjects of Examination*** on the examination announcement for the ***Compensation Claims Clerk*** listed four subject areas:

- Arithmetic computation
- Arithmetic reasoning
- Understanding and interpreting written material
- Office record-keeping

Often, the name of the subject area will give you a good idea about what will be covered in that area. For example, “**Arithmetic computation**” would cover simple arithmetic operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, percents, and averages.

Usually, the announcement contains (or indicates where you can get) an expanded description of what will be covered in a subject area. For example, the expanded description for “**Arithmetic reasoning**” reads: *“These questions test your ability to solve arithmetic problems presented in sentence or short paragraph form. You must read the problem, understand the situation presented, decide what must be done to solve it, and apply the appropriate arithmetic operation(s), in the appropriate order, to determine the correct answer. Knowledge of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division will be necessary. Questions may also involve the use of percents, decimals, and fractions.”*

There are certain words that often appear in the names and expanded descriptions of the subject areas of an examination:

- principles, practices, procedures, methods, techniques
- understanding, interpreting, applying, reasoning, solving

The first group of words generally indicates that you will be asked about your *knowledge* of the principles, practices, procedures, methods, and/or techniques of the particular subject area.

The second group of words generally indicates that you will be tested for the *skill* or *ability* to understand, interpret, apply, reason, and/or solve problems and/or information in the particular subject area.

Preparing for a Test of Knowledge

To prepare for a test of knowledge, you can:

- read books, magazines, manuals, or other printed material on the subject area
- ask people who know a lot about the subject for information
- rely on your own background (think about your experience in the subject area)



Try your local library for books and magazines. If the public library does not have the kinds of books you need, a nearby school or college may. You can go there and take notes. Sometimes you can borrow the books (with the help of your public library) through inter-library loan. Some libraries have collections of government documents. Books or manuals available at your present job may be useful as well.

If you have Internet access, you may want to search the Web for information on the particular subject area. Many libraries have Internet access and can help you with your search.

There are some private companies that publish examination study guides on particular jobs. These are available in libraries or bookstores and have titles like *Civil Service Examination for Accountant*. However, please be aware that the New York State Department of Civil Service is not involved with the publication of these study guides, and does not endorse or recommend any study guides that are published by private companies. Privately published study guides may cover subjects that are or seem similar to those in civil service examinations. Arithmetic computation, arithmetic reasoning, reading skills, and clerical skills are a few examples. However, these books will not give you the exact content of a New York State civil service test because the *Department of Civil Service does not* publish its questions, or sell or give them to anyone else to publish.

Sometimes people who are familiar with the job can be helpful. They may be able to answer your questions, recommend books to read, or help you focus your studying on particular areas.

Do not overlook your own background as a resource. If you meet the minimum qualifications--and we are assuming that you do or you would not be taking the test--you probably already have experience that will be useful when you take the test. Before you start studying, think through what you already know.

Preparing for a Test of Skill or Ability

Preparing for a test of skill or ability may be a bit more difficult. If you want to improve your skill or ability in a certain area, your best preparation is *practice*.

Skills like keyboarding are easy to practice--you sit down at a keyboard and type. To improve other skills, you may need to be more creative.



For example, if you are going to be tested on your skill in *preparing written material*, you can try writing a few paragraphs about an event you attended or a project you completed. Then ask others to read what you wrote. Ask them to tell you whether your paragraphs were clear to them. Ask if there were parts that needed to be rewritten. Get suggestions for improving your grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure from writers or writing teachers. There are plenty of textbooks that contain the rules of good writing, grammar, and punctuation. Learn the rules; then practice them. Then go back and try again.

Books can help you improve your arithmetic skills. *Arithmetic computation* involves skill in correctly performing computations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, percentages, fractions, etc. *Arithmetic reasoning* involves skill in understanding and solving problems that use arithmetic. Here is an example of such a problem:

A company owned six trucks and three vans in March. It sold two trucks in April and two vans in May. The company did not buy any trucks or vans until July. How many vehicles did the company have in June?

The answer is 5. (6 trucks + 3 vans = 9 vehicles owned in March; 2 trucks in April + 2 vans in May = 4 vehicles sold; 9 vehicles owned in March minus 4 vehicles sold in April and May = 5 vehicles left in June.)

Arithmetic computation and arithmetic reasoning problems can be found in schoolbooks or library books. You can practice solving the problems until you are more comfortable with them.

In general, the more you learn about a job, the better you can prepare for the examination. Learn to use the examination announcement as a guide - the whole announcement, not just the *Subjects of Examination* portion. If you decide you need to study, start early.

You will probably remember more if you study when you are relaxed than if you wait until the night before the examination.

Computer-Administered Multiple-Choice Tests

Although most civil service multiple-choice tests are administered in paper and pencil form, some are administered on personal computers at central test locations. Candidates read and answer a computer-administered multiple-choice test directly on a personal computer at a test center. The number of computer-administered tests is expected to grow as personal computers become more available and as computer technology advances. The examination announcement will indicate whether a test is to be computer-administered.

General Test-Taking Guidelines

Read all test directions and instructions carefully. Make sure that you carefully read and follow all directions and any special instructions for the test. If sample questions are provided, do them for practice. *Make sure you understand the directions and instructions before you start to answer the questions.*

Make sure you are answering the correct test questions in the correct test booklets. The particular test you are taking may involve skipping some questions in the test booklet or may involve answering questions in more than one test booklet. You are responsible for making sure you get the right test booklets for your particular test and for determining which questions you are to answer. Refer to your test materials for information on which test booklets and questions you are to answer.

Make sure the choice you mark on your answer sheet matches the question you are answering in the test booklet. Most written multiple choice tests are scanned and scored by machine. You will not get credit for choices you mark in the wrong place on the answer sheet. Check your work to make sure that the number of the question you are answering in the test booklet matches the choice you are marking on your answer sheet.

Make sure you record all your answers on the answer sheet. Only the answers you mark on your answer sheet will be counted toward your score.

Make sure you fill in the circles for your choices, completely and carefully. Avoid making stray pencil marks on your answer sheet. The scanning machine may interpret these marks to be your answers.

Budget your time wisely. Take note of the test time allowance and of the starting and stopping times. Look at the whole test first, then decide how much time to allow yourself for each part. You get just as much credit for an easy question as for a hard one. You may want to answer the easy questions first. Do not take too much time trying to answer the

difficult questions. Jot down the number of the difficult questions and then come back to them later if you have time. (*If you do skip a question in the test booklet, make sure you skip that answer on your answer sheet as well.*) Keep track of the time as you go through the test. Know how much time you have and how many questions you have left to do. If some parts of your test are separately timed, work as rapidly as you can but stay calm and pay attention to the time limit.

Read each question carefully. Make sure you read what is actually printed in the test booklet. The questions are designed to test your knowledge, skills, or abilities in a subject area. They are not meant to trick you or to be deceptive. Read each question carefully, follow the directions given, and answer each question based on the information given and on the actual question asked. After you read the question carefully, read each choice carefully. Make sure that you understand each choice before you decide which one is best. Pick the one choice that best answers the question given. Do not jump to conclusions. Be thorough and think about all the choices. If you do not read each choice carefully, you could easily miss the best one.

Be alert to key words that you must consider to answer the question correctly. Key words establish a condition that only the *correct* answer meets. Words like *best*, *greatest*, *always*, or *most* are examples of key words. If a question asks you to identify the *best* choice among four given, it may be that each of the four choices is a *possible* answer, but only *one* of the four choices is the *best* answer. To answer this type of question correctly, you must carefully read and compare all the choices given.

Here are some examples of questions which contain key words:

1. Of the following foods, which one provides the most vitamin C in a one-cup serving?

- A. grapefruit juice**
- B. sliced peaches**
- C. mashed potatoes**
- D. chopped broccoli**

Answer:

This question asks which of the foods listed provides the **most** vitamin C in a one-cup serving. The key word in this question is *most*. All of the foods mentioned in the choices contain some vitamin C. Many people know that citrus fruits, like oranges, lemons, and grapefruits, are good sources of vitamin C. That makes choice A look attractive. But one cup of broccoli actually contains more vitamin C than one cup of grapefruit juice. Choice D is the *best* answer. To answer this question correctly, you must read **all four** choices carefully before you can determine the **best** answer.

2. Of the following, which one is generally the best way to repair a Compton machine that will not start?

- A. Replace the entire engine.**

- B. Replace the ignitions wires.**
- C. Clean the carburetor.**
- D. Clean the valves.**

Answer:

This question asks which one of the choices listed is generally the best way to repair a Compton machine that will not start. The key words in this question are *generally* and *best*. Assume that in 99 out of 100 cases, the best way to repair a Compton machine that will not start is to replace the ignition wires. Then choice B, replace the ignition wires, is *generally* the *best* way to do the repair. Choice B is the correct answer to this question.

Questions that use words like *generally* and *usually* are looking for the rule, not the exception. Other key words of this type are *common*, *likely*, *more*, *often*, *primarily*, *probably*, *typically*, and *usually*. When you see these words in a question, look for the choice that would be correct most of the time. Do not choose the one that would be correct only some of the time or on rare occasion.

Be alert to questions that use words like *disadvantage*, *except*, *least*, and *not*. If the question asks about a *disadvantage*, be sure not to choose an advantage as your answer. Words that begin with *non-* or *un-* are ways of saying *not*.

3. If grease in a pan catches fire, it is unwise to do which one of the following?

- A. Cover the pan with a lid.**
- B. Pour water on the fire.**

Answer:

This question asks you to identify which action is unwise to do if grease in a pan catches fire. The key word in this question is *unwise*. This word should alert you that the question is looking for what you should *not* do, rather than what you should do if grease in a pan catches fire. Choice A, covering the pan with a lid, would smother the fire by cutting off the oxygen it needs to burn. Choice A is what you *should* do if grease in a pan catches fire. However, since this question asks what is *unwise* to do, choice A is the *wrong* answer to this question. Choice B, pouring water on the fire, would cause the grease and fire in the pan to spatter because water and grease do not mix. This could cause injury or make the fire spread. So, it is *unwise* to pour water on the fire. Therefore, Choice B is the *correct* answer to this question.

4. If an alarm goes off in a mechanical room and the situation appears to be a threat to health or safety, what should you do first?

- A. Turn off the power.**
- B. Call your supervisor.**
- C. Call the security staff.**
- D. Have people leave the area.**

Answer:

This question asks what you should do first if an alarm goes off in a mechanical room. The key word in this question is *first*. When a question uses the word *first*, consider the

choices in the order in which they should be done. For the question above, all four choices list actions that should be taken. The important thing to know is which to do first in the situation. Since the situation could be life-threatening or could result in injury, the first thing to do is to have people leave the area. This allows people to remain safe while the reason for the alarm is determined and the situation is fixed. Choice D is the first thing to do. If the situation were **not** life-threatening, choice A, turning off the power, might be the first thing to do.

When you see a question like this, make sure you understand the question and the situation thoroughly. When you think you have decided the right order for the actions, mark down the choice that you think is the first action to take in the situation. That way, you think about the whole series of possible actions to take, not just one action by itself, and you are more likely to choose the correct answer.

Break large problems into more manageable parts and analyze each part. A very large or complex problem may make more sense if you break it down and look at it one part at a time. Make diagrams or notes on your scrap paper to help you understand each of the separate parts, and how those parts collectively make up the whole problem. Sometimes you can work backwards from the answer to see which answer best fits the problem. Try each answer, in turn, to find the one that works best.

Use a process of elimination, if you are not sure about the answer to a question. Most multiple-choice questions give you four possible choices. You may not be sure of the answer, but you may see right away that one or two of the choices are not correct. If this is the case, immediately eliminate the choices you know are not correct. Then, just think about the others. Pick the best of the choices that remain. Even if one choice seems only a little better than the others, pick that one. If you can eliminate one or more of the choices and make an educated guess about the choices that remain, your chances of success are better than if you make a completely wild guess.

Guess, if you do not know the answer to a question. If you do not answer a question, you will not get credit for it. If you guess correctly, you will get credit. Therefore, if you are not sure of an answer, you should still try to answer the question.

On The Day Before The Test

On the day before the test, you should prepare just as you would for any other important appointment. Know where you are going and explore your options for getting there. Check bus or subway connections or get information about where to park ahead of time.

Prepare what you should take with you to the test. Review the examination announcement and your admission notice to identify everything you need to bring with you to the test. [For example: sharpened No. 2 pencils, a driver's license or picture ID, your admission notice, a watch (to time yourself if you cannot see a clock), a quiet hand-held calculator without keyboard (if allowed), or other required materials.] Since many tests last three or more hours, you may want to bring a quiet lunch or a snack and beverage with you.

Get plenty of rest the night before the test and allow yourself enough time in the morning so that you do not have to rush. Being rested and having a clear head on the day of the test may help as much as any last minute review.

Be aware that you may **not** bring cellular phones, beepers, headphones, or other similar communication devices to the test center. The use of such devices at the test center is strictly prohibited and can result in your disqualification.

Be aware that smoking is **not** allowed at the test center or on the test center grounds.

On The Test Day

When you leave for the test, allow yourself extra time to find parking, to locate the room where you will be taking the test, and to get yourself settled. Be aware, however, that you will not be allowed into the test center until one-half hour before your reporting time.

Test Monitors

There will be test monitors in the building and room where you take the test. The monitors will assure that the tests you are taking are administered fairly to all candidates. On your desk or table, you should find the answer sheet for your test, with directions on how to complete it, and a copy of the *Candidate Directions*. Take the time to look these over while you wait for the test to begin.

The Candidate Directions

Be sure to read the *Candidate Directions* carefully. The *Candidate Directions* include information specific to your test, such as the time allowance for the test, what test booklets and test questions you are to answer, and how the questions will be valued. (Unless the *Candidate Directions* state otherwise, all questions will be valued the same.) The *Candidate Directions* will contain explicit information about which questions you are to answer. For some tests, you may not have to answer every question in every test booklet. but you may have to answer some questions in several test booklets. It is important that you read the *Candidate Directions* **very** carefully. You are responsible for determining which questions you are to answer. **The monitor cannot help you to determine which questions you are to answer.** That part is up to you.

Beginning the Test

The monitor will begin the testing process by announcing what test(s) are being given in your test room. Listen to the monitor carefully and make sure you are in the correct test room. The monitor will then verify your identification and have you sign your admission notice. After the identification and admission process is complete, the monitor may give you some oral instructions, will distribute the test booklets, and will tell you when you may begin the test.

During the Test

Although test monitors cannot answer questions about the test itself, they can assist you if something goes wrong, if there is a defect in your test booklet, or if you have to leave the room for a legitimate purpose. Just raise your hand and a monitor will assist you. If someone or something is distracting you, bring it to the monitor's attention. Do not look at the work of other people in the room or you may be disqualified.

Ending the Test

Before you leave the test room, you must return all the test materials you were given, including scrap paper. Raise your hand when you are finished with the test. A monitor will come to your desk to check and collect all your test materials before dismissing you from the test.

A Final Word



Keep a positive attitude.

Your attitude can affect how well you do on a test. If you are aware of what to expect on test day, read all the test materials carefully, listen to the monitors, follow the directions given, and keep a positive attitude, you will do your best.

Good Luck!

Visit the New York State
Department of Civil Service web site
www.cs.state.ny.us



New York State
Department of Civil Service
Alfred E. Smith Office Building
Albany, NY 12239

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