

A Day in Your Life

Adapted from the website “Government is Good”

Though we usually fail to notice it, government programs and policies improve our daily lives in innumerable ways.

Ask yourself this question: “What has government done for me lately?” If you are like most Americans, you will probably answer: “Not much.” Many people feel like they pay a lot in taxes but don't really get anything back from government. Surveys show that 52% of Americans believe that “government programs have not really helped me and my family.”¹ But let's see if that is really true. Let's examine a typical day in the life of an average middle-class American and try to identify some of the ways that government improves that person's life during that 24-hour period.

6:30 a.m. You are awakened by your clock radio. You know it is actually 6:30 because the National Institute of Standards and Technology keeps the official time. And you can listen to your favorite radio station only because the Federal Communications Commission ensures that radio stations do not overlap and that stations signals are not interfered with by other devices – cell phones, satellite television, wireless computers, etc.

6:35 a.m. Like 17 million other Americans, you have asthma. But as you get out of bed you notice that you are breathing freely this morning. This is thanks in part to government clean air laws that reduce the air pollution that would otherwise greatly worsen your condition.

6:38 a.m. You go into the kitchen for breakfast. You pour some water into your coffeemaker. You simply take for granted that this water is safe to drink. But in fact you count on your city water department to constantly monitor the quality of your water.

6:39 a.m. You flip the switch on the coffee maker. There is no short in the outlet or in the electrical line and there is no resulting fire in your house. Why? Because when your house was being built, the electrical system had to be inspected to make sure it was properly installed – a service provided by your local government. And it was installed by an electrician who was licensed by your state government to ensure his competence and your safety.

6:45 a.m. You sit down to breakfast with your family. You are having eggs – a food that brings with it the possibility of salmonella poisoning, a serious food-borne illness affecting tens of thousands of Americans every year. But the chance of you getting sick from these eggs has now been greatly reduced by a recently passed series of strict federal rules that apply to egg producers.

7:02 a.m. In the bathroom, you use the toilet and flush it. Your local government then takes care of transporting this waste, treating it, and disposing of it in an environmentally responsible manner – all without a second thought by you.

7:20 a.m. As you are getting dressed, a glance outside the window shows some ominous clouds. You check the weather on your TV. All these weather forecasts are made possible by information gathered and analyzed by the National Weather Service, a government agency. Every day, on your behalf, it takes in 190,000 weather observations from surface stations, 2,700 from ships, 115,000 from aircraft, 18,000 for buoys, 250,000 from balloons, and 140 million from satellites – all just to help you plan what to wear and make sure you don't get stuck in a snow storm. And oh yes, this agency may save your life with its hurricane and tornado warnings.

7:30 a.m. Before you leave home, you take your pills to control your high blood pressure. But how do you know that this medicine is safe or effective? Without the testing required by the Food and Drug Administration, you wouldn't. And without the vigilance of the FDA, you could easily fall victim to unscrupulous marketers of unsafe and worthless medicines.

7:45 a.m. You put a couple of letters in your mailbox. For less than the price of a cup of coffee, a government employee will come to your house, pick up the letters, and have them delivered in a few days to someone on the other side of the country. A pretty good deal.

8:15 a.m. You drop your child off at day-care. One of the reasons you can afford this program is the \$3,000 child care tax credit you get from the federal government every year. Equally important, your child benefits from the fact that most state governments now enforce day-care requirements for group size, ratios of children per staff member, teacher training, nutrition, health, safety, and space requirements.

9:00 a.m. While at work, your rights and wellbeing are constantly protected by a wide-ranging network of federal and state laws. The Occupation Safety and Health Act works to protect you from unsafe and unhealthy work conditions. Federal law protects you from workplace discrimination based on race, gender, religion, national origin, or disability. State laws may also require your employer to purchase worker's compensation insurance so that you are covered in case you are injured on the job

12:45 p.m. After lunch, you walk to a nearby ATM and get some cash out of your account – and your money is actually there. That wasn't always true during the economic depression of the 1930s when many banks failed. But your money is safe -- as it was during the recent financial and banking crisis -- because the government guarantees your deposits. In addition, those pieces of paper you put in your wallet are only worth something thanks to the federal government. Our monetary system is entirely a government creation, and the value of money is only maintained because the government regulates the money supply and protects it from counterfeiters.

1:00 p.m. Back at work you hear rumors about a new downsizing plan being talked about by management – a fairly typical occurrence in these days of heightened national and international corporate competition. You know your job is one that could be lost, but you also know that you will be eligible for state-mandated unemployment insurance should that happen. This is just another way that government helps you to cope with the economic risks and uncertainties of a modern economy.

3:00 p.m. On a break, you call your elderly mother in the hospital to check on how she is recovering from her broken hip. Thanks to Medicare, her medical expenses are covered and she does not have to worry about this becoming a financial disaster for her.

3:10 p.m. You call to arrange for a physical therapist to work with your mother when she comes out of the hospital, and again this is paid for by Medicare. And you can be reasonably confident that she will get good therapy because your state Department of Health has a program of examining and licensing these therapists in order to ensure the quality of their work.

5:00 p.m. You leave work—thanks to the government-mandated 40-hour workweek. Labor Department regulations prevent your company from making you work past 5:00 unless it pays you overtime.

6:30 p.m. You take your family out for dinner at a local pizza restaurant. You enjoy a good meal and no one gets sick from E. coli or other food-borne illnesses. This is in large part because your local government conducts regular inspections of all food establishments to protect the health of customers.

11:00 p.m. You go to bed. During your sleep, you are protected by a smoke detector that your city requires to be installed in every residence. Maybe you would have bought one of these yourself, but this law helps to ensure that everyone is protected from the dangers of fire.

Government: The Illusion and the Reality

So goes your typical day as an average middle-class American – *if* you happen to be paying attention to all the different ways that government laws and programs help you lead a better life. For most of us, thinking about our day this way is a real eye-opener. We like to see ourselves as rugged individualists, leading our lives without any help from anyone, especially government. But this is an illusion. As we have just seen, the reality is completely different. We are constantly benefiting from a variety of government laws and programs. Federal, state, and local government employees are literally working around the clock to make our lives better in innumerable ways. Ironically, even those conservatives who complain that they don't want government "interfering" in their lives depend heavily and repeatedly on government throughout their day. And the examples described earlier are only a small sample of the many ways that government programs improve our lives. They do not even include many of the most important services of government, such as preventing economic depressions, catching criminals, caring for our fragile ecosystem, dispensing justice, thwarting terrorist attacks, and eradicating deadly diseases. A detailed description of all the various ways that our lives are improved by the activities of local, state, and federal governments could easily take up hundreds of pages. When it comes down to it, government has an extensive and overwhelmingly positive effect on our everyday lives.