The nonpartisan Congressional Research Service (CRS) supports the work of congressional committees and members of Congress by conducting analysis and performing research to support Congress in carrying out its constitutional functions. CRS has experts that cover all areas of legislative activity, including domestic, economic, international, legal, and scientific issues. Approximately 700 staff work at CRS, including about 350 individuals who serve as policy or legal experts and about 100 information professionals.

I worked in the law division of CRS from 2006 to 2012 and handled requests related to administrative law, food and drug law, inspectors general, presidential pardons and executive orders. I was hired through the law recruit program, which is open to students in their final year of law school. I had initially heard of CRS when I was a college
intern on Capitol Hill, but I did not know that CRS had a legal division until my 2L summer. As summer law clerks at an executive branch agency, we were given the opportunity to attend lunchtime programs about opportunities throughout the federal government. One session focused on jobs on Capitol Hill, and it was at this session that we heard about ALD, as well as positions with House and Senate Legislative Counsel. I remember my former colleague discussing some legal issues on which he had answered requests for Congress, such as the constitutionality of a D.C. vote and right-to-die issues involving Terri Schiavo. As an intern, I had always thought of CRS experts as ivory tower types. I was happy to learn that the job was not limited to writing reports, but also involved a great deal of interaction with congressional staff.

CRS Legislative Attorneys write reports which are sometimes made available to the general public by members of Congress. Reports can cover hot topics and can be used to manage numerous telephone or e-mail requests that attorneys may receive on a particular subject. Some CRS reports involve intradivisional teams of multiple attorneys. Other reports may involve the expertise of policy analysts in other divisions of CRS.

In addition, ALD attorneys write confidential memoranda, which are for a single congressional client. Members of Congress may sometimes make public confidential memoranda, especially when they concern issues of first impression. A day in the life of an ALD attorney is somewhat unpredictable. Congressional priorities and interests drive one’s work, so although one may arrive at the office in the morning expecting to work on a particular issue or pending request, telephone calls from congressional clients about a story in the morning’s newspaper or a statement made at a hearing could alter the course of the day. Some days may include in-person consultations (briefings) for congressional staff—and occasionally, a member—while other days may be spent fielding telephone or e-mail requests or writing legal analyses. ALD attorneys also review draft and pending legislation and offer legislative options for addressing legal and policy issues. Most attorneys are responsible for more than one issue area, so in a given day, an attorney may handle unrelated requests in all of the attorney’s different areas.
Occasionally, Congress may call upon an ALD attorney to testify before congressional committees. Such an offer to testify may occur because of an ALD attorney’s substantive expertise in the area or may occur after the attorney has assisted committee staff by preparing legal memoranda in advance of hearings, as well as potential questions for members.

ALD offers a two-week series of Federal Law Updates twice a year—a series of lectures on current legal topics of interest to the Congress. Non-attorneys often attend as well. ALD attorneys also participate in several CRS educational institutes about congressional process and procedure. Furthermore, several ALD attorneys prepare The Constitution of the United States of America—Analysis and Interpretation (also known as the Constitution Annotated).

I would recommend working for CRS or for a Member of the Congress for anyone interested in the political process. The variety of congressional requests makes work interesting, and there is a chance to gain substantive depth in one’s areas of expertise. I can point to particular sections of bills and laws that I helped congressional staff draft or tweak. I also enjoyed the opportunity to work with staff in an objective capacity. The job may not be for everyone, however, as attorneys must work with congressional staff in an objective manner and present both sides of an issue. Attorneys may help staff sort through the arguments of interest groups, or determine whether a point raised by a lobbyist is a cause for major concern. This is a job where you have the satisfaction of knowing you have made a difference.

For additional information about the CRS Law Recruit Program, please visit http://www.loc.gov/crsinfo/law-recruit.html.

**Vanessa K. Burrows** counsels clients on health care law and FDA regulatory issues. Her broad-based experience also includes HIPAA compliance, alcohol beverages, and public health. Previously, Vanessa served as the HIPAA Privacy Officer for the City of Chicago and as an attorney for the Chicago Department of Public Health. Earlier, Vanessa worked on Capitol Hill as a Legislative Attorney for the Congressional Research Service in Washington, D.C., where she advised Members of Congress and their staff. She addressed specific legal issues in legislation including the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, and the Food and Drug Administration Amendments Act. While in law school, Vanessa was the senior articles editor of the Administrative Law Review.