In Brief

Nikolai Sklaroff, (2nd from left) discusses career development options as part of GFOA's Learning Pathways resource with members of his team at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering with GFOA is a Two-Way Street

BY WESLEY WHITAKER

"What I love about participating in a project like this," Nikolai Sklaroff said, "is that yes, you're asked to share information and knowledge, but you get back so much more in return in terms of your own continued learning." As the capital finance director at San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), Nikolai and his team recently lent their industry expertise to assist GFOA in developing GFOA's Learning Pathways tool for debt management.

The Learning Pathways initiative is a recent GFOA project that hopes to solidify the skills, competencies, knowledge, and level of expertise you need to be successful in your public finance career. GFOA had already released a pathway for accounting and budgeting and reached out for assistance with debt management—which was not a small ask. But Sklaroff understood that volunteering for a project like this doesn't have to be a one-way sacrifice; it can be a powerful and dynamic two-way street. He enlisted his team and immediately jumped into the work of defining the career ladder, reviewing and critiquing the competencies, and offering feedback. "We're really excited about not only having contributed to it," he added, "but how it's contributing back to what we're doing internally."

"Everything was well prepared, and we could really focus on contributing to ideas without the other noise we often find when we participate in other projects," Sklaroff explained. That streamlined process allowed the SFPUC team to focus on the unique structural challenges inherent to public debt. While most governments have a standard accounting function governed by GAAP, the scale and management of debt operations vary wildly across the country, he noted. Large organizations like the SFPUC have entire standalone debt divisions, while smaller communities rely on a single finance director who balances debt alongside dozens of other operational hats. Because of this immense variability, having a single, reliable, and commercially objective resource to map out professional growth in public debt is entirely unprecedented.

For Sklaroff's team, the project's benefits were felt almost immediately. Not only did they use the materials to audit their internal job descriptions, but they also took a step back to reflect on their day-to-day operations. "We're all so busy with just the day-to-day of getting things done that projects like this with GFOA cause us to sit back and actually reflect and think,

EXHIBIT 1 | The Debt Management Pathway

Debt Analyst → Senior Debt Analyst → Deputy Debt Administrator → Debt Administrator → Capital Finance Manager

'Yes, this is the way things have been done in the past. This is the way we've been organized in the past. But does this make sense for how we're organized in the future?'"

The benefits weren't just felt by his team; Sklaroff himself expressed his satisfaction in imparting his knowledge and expertise to future public finance officers. "I still have many years ahead of me in this business, but I'm closer to the end of my career than the beginning of my career," he said. "I love bringing people along, whether it's in mentorship or other education, and then seeing how people thrive." He underscored that volunteering builds valuable professional karma. It regularly pays practical dividends when you run into former conference attendees who have used your training to become finance directors, or when you build a nationwide network of future talent and peers.

When asked about any barriers to volunteering, Sklaroff offered a surprising insight: Many potential volunteers suffer from a form of professional imposter syndrome, believing their local knowledge isn't "expert" enough to matter. This isn't the case, and GFOA makes it simple to donate your perspective by meeting you exactly where you are, welcoming whatever time or technical analysis you can offer.

"A lot of people are reluctant to volunteer for things because they think, 'I don't know enough.' But you can contribute even when you're not the largest and most frequent participant in an activity," Sklaroff said. "Everyone has something to contribute to that learning. An activity like this is as much a learning experience as a contribution experience."

Volunteering with GFOA can yield significant benefits—and some that you don't expect. As Nikolai described, it can be an investment in "good professional karma." Beyond the personal satisfaction of mentoring the next generation and watching colleagues thrive, the professional rewards flow directly back to your own desk in the form of fresh tools, strategic insights, and a nationwide network of peer support. Your unique experience is essential to shaping a future for public finance.

Don't let imposter syndrome keep you on the sidelines—step onto the two-way street of volunteering at GFOA! You can find opportunities at **gfoa.org/volunteer.**

Wesley Whitaker *is an administrative assistant at GFOA.*

GET INVOLVED

If you're interested in lending your expertise to the Learning Pathways initiative, email Randall Towns at rtowns@gfoa.org

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Left: The debt management team for the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission. Right: Nikolai Sklaroff