



INTERVIEW

Making a Difference

An interview with **Ariam Isaac**, fiscal and administrative services manager for the City of Bakersfield Police Department.

BY ALISON WUENSCH

Ariam Isaac has worked for the City of Bakersfield, California, in multiple roles since 2019, most recently as the fiscal and administrative services manager for the City of Bakersfield Police Department. Bakersfield, which is in the San Joaquin Valley, has long been a center of agriculture; it is also one of the most important hubs for the oil industry in California. The cost of living is relatively affordable, compared to other cities, and in recent years Bakersfield has focused growth and development efforts on revitalizing downtown and human services.

“Our local government plays a vital role in addressing the needs of local residents. Bakersfield is a city with a strong sense of identity and commitment to progress,” Isaac said. She also appreciates Bakersfield’s economic diversity and its strategic location, with easy

access to major destinations like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and the Bay Area. “It still offers a more affordable cost of living, compared to those urban areas, and it makes it an ideal place, I think, for both the professional and personal life, while also having the convenience of proximity to major metropolitan areas.” Another plus is reasonable commute times within the city, adding to overall quality of life and work-life balance.

Isaac jumped into her current role when the City of Bakersfield Police Department needed a business manager in 2022. Before that, she worked as the business manager in the Solid Waste Division for Public Works at the City of Bakersfield. And before that, she worked as an assistant accountant with the City of Delano and as an accountant at California State University, Bakersfield.

Isaac did not initially get her start in the public sector. She began her career in finance in the hotel industry, working as

a cashier at the Doubletree in Bakersfield and working her way up. She was eager for new opportunities, so she moved to Las Vegas, where her brother lived, to pursue other opportunities in the hotel industry. But when the economic downturn hit in 2008, she was laid off and decided to pursue a more stable career. “The economic downturn in 2008 shifted my perspective on job stability,” she said. “I was one of the ones who was laid off, one of the thousands of people who were laid off, and just witnessing that volatility in the private sector, it motivated me to pursue a more stable career in public finance.” She began applying to positions around Bakersfield while still in Las Vegas. The City of Bakersfield had a hiring freeze at that time, so she applied to surrounding areas—and that was how she ended up with the City of Delano, “setting the stage for my career.”

It also sparked Isaac’s interest in studying public administration. While



working on her bachelor's degree in accounting, she found that she enjoyed the challenges within the public sector. "It motivated me to continue my education and kind of switch gears." Isaac earned her Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a major in Public Administration from California State University, Bakersfield in May 2018. Upon earning her degree, she began working for the City of Bakersfield in a management position. "My role there deepened my interest in areas such as policy development and strategic management, so pursuing my master's in public administration was a logical next step, and it allowed me to build on my practical experience." She earned her MPA from California State University, Bakersfield in December 2022.

Isaac began her tenure at the City of Bakersfield as a business manager in the Public Works Department, specifically in the Solid Waste Division. She was initially unfamiliar with solid waste management, but what she enjoyed most about her job was "the opportunity to actually step outside of the central finance office and immerse myself in an operational setting."

The role presented her with new challenges. "I knew about the different carts and the days I put my carts out. That's about all I knew about solid waste. But to gain a comprehensive understanding, I made an effort to learn about the operations and types of equipment and trucks that we use. I participated in ride-alongs in the different vehicles, just to observe operations." She felt that knowledge was crucial for budgeting and being able to write administrative reports for the city council and, overall, to effectively perform her duties.

But Isaac's first year in the Solid Waste Division held some significant challenges. First, her director, who had been with the City of Bakersfield for more than 20 years, retired, and then the COVID-19 pandemic hit. "We didn't have a clear understanding of the pandemic's duration or impact, so it was difficult to do revenue projections for our commercial accounts. The situation strengthened my problem-solving and analytical skills, and it deepened my understanding



Located in Kern County, California, the City of Bakersfield is a significant hub for both agriculture and energy production.

of the complexities inherent not just in solid waste, but in public sector financial management."

After working in the Solid Waste Division for nearly three years, Isaac jumped into her current role at the Police Department when they needed help managing the business office. She enjoys the dynamic and fast-paced environment. "The nature of the work here keeps me engaged, and there's never a dull moment."

Isaac thrives on the bustle and constant learning her job involves, and she finds budget time particularly rewarding and fulfilling. Not everyone would feel that way, of course, but for Isaac, "it's a time that I get to forecast and allocate resources that directly impact community safety services, and it's essential for ensuring financial stability and accountability. It helps us prioritize our spending on vital programs and initiatives, and just being involved in the process means I can support the department's mission and contribute to making our community a safer place."

Budgeting for the Police Department comes with a number of specific challenges—rising subscription costs, for example, and specifically those associated with rapidly advancing technology. Isaac's

office strategically manages these increases by carefully budgeting and optimizing the department's financial resources. This includes reallocating funds from non-essential areas and finding ways to support those costs through grant opportunities.

And then there's recruitment. Isaac names several factors that affect recruitment, including competitive private-sector salaries, increased scrutiny, many employees retiring, the demanding nature of the job, and budget constraints. One solution the Bakersfield Police Department is pursuing is to increase civilian roles in the department, allowing law enforcement officers to focus more on their law enforcement duties. "This approach not only helps manage the workload, but it also supports a more efficient use of our human resources." The department is also holding more job fairs and offering recruitment bonuses to enhance their team's capacity.

The Police Department has also been involved in the citywide effort to implement a new ERP system. Isaac says the city picked one around the time she was transitioning to her current position, so she missed a lot of the earlier

stages of ERP implementation—although she wishes she could have been more involved. The department is using a legacy system, so the need to replace it is clear. The City of Bakersfield implemented the financial aspects of their new ERP system, including budget, accounts payable, accounts receivable, and purchasing, in March 2024. The city is still working to implement the human capital management side, specifically focusing on payroll and human resources.

Isaac was involved in the test phase for implementing the financial system, and she acknowledges that it has been a challenge. “We feel the discrepancy between the test phase and the live environment. I think the scenarios and the reports that we tested should have closely mirrored what we ultimately encountered once the system went live—but that’s not what we’re experiencing.” For example, many of the reports the department previously relied on have not been accessible in the new system, affecting their operations. Because of that issue, in addition to issues with accounts receivables and uploading P-card transactions—among others—they have paused some of the other systems and pushed the deadlines out for some phases. But they are working through it, Isaac said. “I remain optimistic that as we continue to refine the system and address these issues, the ERP will ultimately enhance our department’s efficiency and effectiveness.”

Discussing the differences between working in a central finance office as opposed to working in a department, Issac observes that work tends to be more structured in the central finance office, with clearly defined processes and responsibilities. This environment allows for a focused approach to financial management. On the other hand, roles within departments often require a broader skill set, as they involve a variety of tasks that go beyond finance alone. Department-specific finance roles like working in Public Works or the Police Department focus on delivering essential community services and involve a blend of operational tasks and budget management. They face

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dynamic situations, unplanned events (like equipment breakdowns), and other urgent needs, within the constraints of a budget.

Isaac’s duties in the Police Department include overseeing payroll for a staff of 700 people—a complex task because of the variety in shifts, memorandums of understanding, and benefits for sworn versus civilian officers. The department does a lot of its own purchasing, sets up all training sessions, writes agreements, and manages and monitors grants. “The position requires not only financial management but also a thorough understanding of the operational aspects of the department. My current role demands a comprehensive understanding of financial management and the specific operational needs of the department, which requires my involvement in various meetings. I am part of command staff meetings, fleet meetings, and technology discussions focusing on enhancements to our equipment.”

Contrasting her experiences at the department level with her experiences in the central finance office, Issac said, “Working in central finance, the focus is often on maintaining accurate records, processing transactions, ensuring compliance with financial regulations, with responsibilities that involve working primarily with internal teams. The work tends to be more structured, and it involves routine tasks, purchasing, accounts payable, accounts receivable, forecasting, and financial reporting.” Others’ experiences may differ, she noted, but “I’m grateful that I started in finance before coming to operations because I was able to have that experience, and then all I needed to really learn was that operational side.”

“I never imagined myself in a career constantly dealing with numbers,” Isaac said. “I never liked it in school, but this is different to me. It’s not like it’s just everyday algebra—there’s a different purpose behind it, so I enjoy it.” When asked if she has any advice for people who are thinking about a career in local government, she said, “I’d say it’s a great career and a way to make a real difference in the community you’re serving.” But she urges potential public servants to be prepared for a different pace than in the private sector—things often move more slowly, so patience is key. She also offers some practical tips. “Focus on building genuine relationships. Stay updated on local issues, by regularly following the local news, subscribing to relevant publications that keep you aware of developments at the state level that impact your local community and be flexible in tackling those unique challenges that arise.”

Isaac did not specifically imagine working in public finance, and she never imagined herself working in the Police Department, either. But she does now see herself continuing to advance within the public sector, ideally in an executive management role. Her goal is to play a key role in shaping financial direction, the success of her organization, and guiding the next generation of public service students. “In public finance, our mission extends beyond numbers. It’s about fostering trust and delivering value to the community we serve. Every decision we make shapes the future of our city.” ■

Alison Wuensch is a consultant with GFOA’s Research and Consulting Center.