

2023-2024 KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY



Kern County and Bakersfield City Park Rangers *A Tale of Two Programs*

Release Date
May 22, 2024

KERN COUNTY AND BAKERSFIELD CITY PARK RANGERS A Tale of Two Programs

Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity.

Kay Redfield Jamison

SUMMARY:

Parks are the crown jewels of any city. Every child deserves to play in safe and clean playgrounds and parks. Every family deserves to have a park in their neighborhood where they can have a picnic, take a swim, or play sports. Every resident desires high quality and clean amenities in their parks. Park rangers play an integral part in the parks throughout the City of Bakersfield Recreation and Parks Ranger Program (City) and Kern County Park Ranger Program (County).

Park rangers are the guardians of Kern County and Bakersfield City parks. Rangers focus on proactive policing in hopes of stopping a small problem before it turns into something bigger. They enforce park rules and respond to complaints or illegal activities within the premises to ensure public safety.

County Rangers might start their day patrolling Hart Park in the foothills of eastern Kern County and then travel to Heritage Park in East Bakersfield. City Rangers may start their day patrolling various parks throughout the City, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Park and The Park at River Walk. The rangers monitor people that may be hanging around the park drinking, engaging in illegal activity, or being a nuisance to other patrons. The rangers face many challenges but know that their most important role is keeping people safe while enjoying the park.

PURPOSE OF INQUIRY:

California Penal Code §§925 and 925(a) authorizes the 2023-2024 Kern County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) to investigate and report on the operations and management of the Kern County Park Rangers and Security Division and the Bakersfield City Park Rangers programs.

METHODOLOGY:

The Grand Jury researched the internet and conducted interviews with staff members from the following agencies: the Bakersfield City Recreation and Parks, the Kern County Sheriff's Office, including the Kern County Park Ranger and Building Protection (Security) Bureau, and the Kern County General Services Department (General Services) in charge of park maintenance. The Grand Jury interviewed and rode along with park rangers from both the County and City, inspected the grounds and facilities at Hart Memorial Park (Hart Park) and Lake Ming, and reviewed previous Grand Jury reports.

DISCUSSION OF FACTS:

There are two main divisions of Park Rangers in Kern County. These are the Kern County Park Rangers, who are considered to be law enforcement based, and the Bakersfield City Park Rangers, who are considered to be community based enforcement.

KERN COUNTY PARK RANGERS:



Photo from facebook.com

County Rangers are responsible for all recreational areas within Kern County jurisdiction. The three primary areas requiring the most coverage are Buena Vista Aquatic Recreational Area, Hart Park, and Lake Isabella. Other areas include Lake Ming, Lake Woollomes, and 35 neighborhood parks and campgrounds. The rangers also patrol and monitor more than 100 parks and campgrounds across more than 8,000 square miles in Kern County.

Requirements to become a County Ranger:

- High School Diploma or General Educational Development (GED)
- P.O.S.T. (Police Officer Standards and Training) certificates for Arrest, Search and Seizure, and Arrest & Firearms
- Valid California Class C Driver's License
- Basic First Aid and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) certification
- Pass Written and Physical Agility Tests

County Rangers had been underpaid compared to the City Ranger program, making new recruitment difficult. They are also underutilizing their access to local schools for recruitment. They have relied heavily on part time rangers. The Kern County Board of Supervisors voted at the December 19, 2023, meeting to increase salaries for Park Ranger, Senior Park Ranger,

Supervising Park Ranger, and Park Ranger Manager by 10.49% to 53% (depending on classification) effective December 30, 2023. These new changes put them on par with the City Ranger program. The County Rangers had been under the jurisdiction of General Services, but at the same meeting, the Kern County Board of Supervisors announced that the responsibility of the County Rangers would be transferred to the Kern County Sheriff’s Office.

Current Entry Level Salaries:

Kern County Park Rangers I	Bakersfield City Park Rangers I
Hourly rate: \$31.03 - \$37.09	Hourly rate: \$30.48 - \$37.12
Monthly salary: \$5,379.38 - \$6,428.85	Monthly salary: \$5,283.89 - \$6,434.31

Generated by the Grand Jury

Additional funding to assist in hiring new County Rangers, as well as purchase new vehicles and supplies for the rangers, will be reflected in the 2024-2025 fiscal year budget. General Services will reallocate \$3.2 million to the Sheriff’s Office and the County will allocate an additional \$5.27 million for more Ranger positions and operating costs. Below is the current and proposed staffing levels for the Ranger Program:

County Rangers Classifications	Current Authorized Levels	Proposed Staffing Levels
Chief Deputy	1	1
Sheriff Commander	0	1
Sheriff Lieutenant	0	1
Sheriff Sergeant	0	3
Sheriff Senior Deputy	0	1
Park Ranger Manager	1	0
Supervising Ranger	2	1
Senior Ranger	3	4
Rangers	11	35
Security Attendant	4	5
Extra Help Senior Ranger	6	0
Extra Help Ranger	14	8
Extra Help Park Security	5	0
Total	47	60

Generated by the Grand Jury

Additional equipment requested are tasers and body cameras including personal protection equipment. New patrol vehicles requested will be pick-up trucks, SUVs, and water vessels. The Sheriff’s Office is in the process of updating procedure manuals to reflect the new guidelines and expectations for the rangers. New software will be installed on laptop computers for improved communication with the Sheriff’s Office. The process of transitioning has begun.

County Rangers are expected to handle multiple types of law enforcement situations and be able to relate to people in all aspects of public relations. Some of their training and duties will include:

- A. Attending a modified training academy through the Sheriff's Office.
- B. Patrolling parks on foot or in their vehicle on a regular daily basis and responding to various situations involving public safety and the protection of property.
- C. Ensuring visitors have a valid license for fishing or camping and issuing citations, making arrests, or detaining subjects if necessary.
- D. Investigating crimes that occur within Kern County Park jurisdiction and County properties.
- E. Patrolling inland waterways, lakes, and rivers, certification in water rescue, identifying potential Driving Under the Influence, and State Boating classes.



Photo from flickriver.com

Even though the County Rangers are adding new staff and equipment to the program, this will take time to finalize. Currently, there is only one supervising ranger to cover Lake Ming and Buena Vista Aquatic Recreational Area, and one ranger dedicated to homeless encampments at the parks, who is paid through a grant. Lake Woollomes, near Delano, is not receiving park ranger coverage because of the lack of staffing. The lack of coverage increases the opportunity for illegal activity. This will be resolved with the increased staffing and equipment.

Often, there are “pop-up” events, which are unscheduled and unauthorized, such as sports car or motorcycle gatherings, that draw a large crowd of people. These events are not planned, have no permits, and are usually advertised on social media. These “pop-up” gatherings can quickly get out of control. With only minimal coverage, this type of activity leaves rangers unprotected until back up officers can respond. Park patrons can call a non-emergency phone number (661-861-3110) to report illegal activity. These calls are answered by the Kern County Sheriff's Office.

Negligent drivers within the parks may also put the public at risk. The speed limit within the larger parks is 25 miles per hour. Vehicles that do not adhere to the posted speed limit can be cited by the rangers.

All maintenance (landscaping, playground, and restrooms) for the County parks is performed by General Services. There are currently only 30 maintenance personnel for parks throughout all of Kern County. County parks within Bakersfield City are monitored on a daily basis by the rangers. Unfortunately, parks in the outlying areas of the County, such as Delano, Frazier Park, and Mojave, are not monitored as often. If there is a maintenance issue at one of the parks that cannot be resolved quickly, or the personnel are not available, the job may be contracted out to a third party for repairs. If repairs are not done in a timely manner, it can become a safety or health issue to the patrons of the parks.

KERN COUNTY BUILDING PROTECTION (SECURITY):

The Security Division under the Kern County Park Rangers Department is primarily focused on safeguarding various County properties and providing a safe environment for employees and visitors. A security sub-contractor is assigned to monitor visitors and the metal detectors at County offices. There are additional Security Attendants that monitor the County Administration Building and the Southeast Partnership Building. They do not receive the same training as a ranger and do not carry weapons. Security Attendants and Park Rangers are assigned to buildings at the direction of the Board of Supervisors.

Buildings monitored by County Rangers include the Kern County Administrative Building, Department of Human Services, Child Support Services, Southeast Neighborhood Partnership Family Resource Center, and Tiny Homes. General Services currently has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Sheriff's Office to provide rangers, but it may be reviewed and revised at a later date.

BAKERSFIELD CITY PARK RANGERS:



Photo from bakersonfieldcity.us

The Bakersfield City Park Ranger Program was established in August 2022. It is responsible for all parks and sports complexes within the Bakersfield city limits. This includes over 62 parks, four public pools, 10 spray parks, two sports complexes, two skate parks, one large amphitheater, disc golf courses, and pickleball courts. The starting budget in 2022 was \$3.2 million with Measure N (Public Safety & Vital Services Initiative) having been one of the reasons for the success of the program. The adopted 2023-2024 budget is \$27,877,678. Some projects that will be financed are the MLK Revitalization Project, a new park located at Linnell Way in East Bakersfield, and various structures such as playground replacements, splash pad coating, basketball courts, and pickleball/tennis court renovations, as well as shade structures in various parks.

City Park Rangers currently have 18 rangers patrolling the parks. They observe visitor behavior and park conditions, parking violations, monitor homeless encampments, and document activities at parks (vandalism or illegal activity). Rangers document and report any safety hazards to the buildings or playgrounds to the Park Ranger Supervisor for immediate repairs. Rangers are responsible for locking restrooms at 10:00 p.m. and unlocking the restrooms at 5:00 a.m.

City Park Rangers are required to have a high school diploma or GED, be in good physical condition, and be able to pass the interview process. Additional training required:

- CPR and First Aid training
- Basic baton and weaponless defense training (such as the use of pepper spray)
- Crisis intervention training
- Up to four weeks of field training

The rangers' goal is to become a part of the community around the parks they are assigned. Rangers do not carry guns, but are equipped with a collapsible baton, pepper spray, NARCAN, and radios which are programmed to communicate with local police. They may soon be able to carry tasers. For issues outside the rangers' purview, Bakersfield Police Department (BPD) will be contacted. Rangers are given a procedures manual that outlines the process to deal with any situation. They do not have the authority to write citations. They have contacts to many services that deal with homelessness and mental health issues.

The rangers work 10-hour shifts, including answering calls regarding the City parks that were previously answered by BPD. This policy allows BPD to be available for other situations. Parks are categorized as Tiers 1 to 4 with Tier 1 parks as the most in need of monitoring, such as Beale Park and MLK Park.

Homeless encampments are not allowed in any of the parks. Many homeless move to other locations when directed by the rangers. If there is a situation that involves a mental health issue, the rangers contact a Mobile Evaluation Team (MET). The teams consist of staff from Kern Behavioral Health and Recovery Services and deals with psychiatric services.

The two large sports complexes, Mesa Marin Sports Complex and Kaiser Permanente Sports Village, are usually leased by sports organizations for practices or games, but the parks are still monitored by the rangers. The leasing organization for the sports organizations are responsible for locking restrooms and gates after events. During any large event, there will be additional rangers assigned as needed.

Park patrons can report a complaint regarding trash, vandalism, graffiti, etc., to the Park Ranger Complaint Line or through the Bakersfield Mobile App. The information on how to report complaints is located on signs posted on the outside walls of the restrooms located at the parks. Some small neighborhood parks do not have restrooms, so signs will be posted at the entrance to the park or near play areas. Once a complaint is recorded, a clerk will verify the location, prioritize the complaint, and notify the appropriate city department. Cameras are being considered for high profile areas to help curb vandalism.

Support Team for Operations, Rangers and Maintenance (STORM) are mostly skilled craftsmen and equipment operators who can respond to a varying number of issues within the Department. Primary duties include:

- Emergency repairs
- Encampment clean-ups
- Gate fabrications
- Illegal dumping
- Tree and storm debris response
- Securing facilities
- General upkeep such as painting and power washing

STORM assists the Bakersfield City Recreation and Parks in cleaning up and managing any repairs for the parks.

FINDINGS:

- F1. Both Park Ranger Programs have dedicated employees who want parks to be a safe and clean environment for the citizens, making the parks more enjoyable.
- F2. City Rangers are a self-sufficient program, making them less reliant on other City services.
- F3. Occasionally, vehicles being driven through the Kern County parks do not follow posted speed limit signs, endangering visitors.
- F4. Since most illegal activity occurs after dark in both City and County parks, daylight operating hours would be preferable for safety concerns.
- F5. Security at various County buildings have multiple types of security levels to monitor the building, which may be a less efficient use of staff.
- F6. County parks in outlying areas may not receive the same maintenance scheduling because of staffing deficiencies.
- F7. Kern County high schools and colleges are a good source for recruitment into the Rangers' Programs.

COMMENTS:

The Bakersfield City Park Rangers and the Kern County Park Rangers Programs are both staffed with hard working individuals. As with most government departments, staffing and budget are the biggest issues. Both Programs are doing the best they can with the resources they have available, and are working hard to protect the citizens and their desire to have safe and clean parks for their families. As crime and homelessness continues to increase around our parks, these programs need the full support of the political leaders within the City and County.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The 2023-2024 Kern County Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. Speed bumps be installed on the main roads in the County parks to decrease the speed of vehicles driving through the park by January 1, 2025. (Finding 3)
- R2. Both the City and County review and evaluate the operating hours of the parks to reduce unwanted activities within the parks. Exemptions could be considered for special events at the parks. The review should be initiated by January 1, 2025. (Finding 4)
- R3. Develop an MOU with outside vendors, e.g., Work Release Program, to monitor the maintenance of parks in outlying areas of Kern County by September 1, 2024. This would help with staffing shortages. (Finding 6)
- R4. Staffing of security personnel at County buildings be reviewed for efficiency and better utilization of County Rangers by September 1, 2024. (Finding 5)

- R5. Kern County Rangers and the Bakersfield City Rangers contact high schools and colleges throughout Kern County to inform students of the opportunities of joining the Ranger Programs to help with staff recruitment, beginning September 1, 2024. (Finding 7)

NOTES:

- The Kern County Sheriff’s Office and Bakersfield City should post a copy of this report where it will be available for public review.
- Persons wishing to receive an email notification of newly released reports may sign up at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>
- Present and past Kern County Grand Jury Final Reports and Responses can be accessed on the Kern County Grand Jury website at: <https://www.kerncounty.com/government/other-agencies/grand-jury>

RESPONSE DEADLINE:

- **REQUIRED WITHIN 60 DAYS FROM:**
 - Kern County Sheriff’s Office (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and Recommendations 1 through 5)
- **REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS FROM:**
 - Bakersfield City Council (Findings 1, 2, 4, 7 and Recommendations 2 and 5)
 - Kern County Board of Supervisors (Findings 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and Recommendations 1 through 5)

RESPONSES ARE REQUIRED PURSUANT TO CAL. PENAL CODE §§933 (c) AND 933.05 WITHIN 90 DAYS TO:

- **PRESIDING JUDGE
SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF KERN
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 212
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**
- **FOREPERSON
KERN COUNTY GRAND JURY
1415 TRUXTUN AVENUE, SUITE 600
BAKERSFIELD, CA 93301**

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Cal. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.



1350 Norris Road
Bakersfield, California 93308-2231

June 27, 2024

The Honorable Eric Bradshaw, Presiding Judge
Kern County Superior Court
1415 Truxtun Avenue
Bakersfield CA 93301

Dear Judge Bradshaw:

On May 22, 2024, the Grand Jury Published their *2023-2024 Final Report: Kern County and Bakersfield City Park Rangers, A Tale of Two Programs*. This report addresses the Grand Jury's investigation and report on the operation and management of the Kern County Park Rangers and Security Division. The Bakersfield City Park Ranger Program will be addressed in a separate report authored by a representative from the City of Bakersfield. Below is the Sheriff's Office response to the Grand Jury's findings and recommendations.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Grand Jury for its efforts in reviewing our newly acquired Park Ranger Program. The Park Rangers will be fully integrated into the Kern County Sheriff's Office effective July 1, 2024. The Park Rangers were previously managed by County General Services. As always, the Sheriff's Office appreciates the valuable insight the Grand Jury has provided.

The following is the Kern County Sheriff's Office response to the Kern County Grand Jury's 2023-2024 final report regarding the Park Rangers. The report indicated a response was needed to address the Grand Jury's "Findings" and "Recommendations."

Response to Findings:

F1. Both Park Ranger Programs have dedicated employees who want parks to be safe and clean environments for the citizens, making the parks more enjoyable.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office agrees with this finding.

The Kern County Park Ranger Bureau is dedicated to safeguarding the county's natural and cultural resources, ensuring their preservation for future generations, and providing safety and security to the public. It emphasizes the integral role of the division in maintaining the county park's legacy and contributing to the well-being of visitors and protecting the park's resources and facilities for the community.

F3. Occasionally, vehicles being driven through the Kern County Parks do not follow posted. Speed limit signs, endangering visitors.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office agrees with this finding.

Vehicles speeding is not an isolated issue to the parks only. Traffic violations happen throughout the County and in recreation areas. The Kern County Sheriff's Office plans to work with allied agencies to improve upon this problem locally and to educate the public through community-oriented policing and enforcement.

F4. Since most illegal activity occurs after dark in both City and County Parks, daylight operating hours would be preferable for safety concerns.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office agrees with this finding in part.

The county parks are open spaces for all to enjoy. The Kern County Sheriff's Office will evaluate data and crime-related statistics to develop ways to balance enforcing park hours while maintaining an open and safe environment.

F5. Security at various County Buildings have multiple types of security levels to monitor the building, which may be a less efficient use of staff.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office agrees with this finding in part.

Staffing and security of county buildings to ensure visitors feel welcome is an important aspect of our duties. Many of the county buildings have open areas for families to enjoy. The County employs different levels of security personnel for buildings, and we are constantly evaluating and balancing building security and park safety.

F6. County Parks in outlying areas may not receive the same maintenance scheduling because of staffing deficiencies.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office agrees with this finding.

Maintenance and sanitation are functions of the County General Services Department. Park Rangers have procedures for contacting General Services for maintenance requests when they recognize issues.

Additionally, community members can utilize the "MyKern" application, which can be downloaded from the Google Play or Apple app stores. This resource provides residents with an elevated level of service and strengthens their connection to their local government.

"MyKern" is a pivotal step in supporting Kern County's transparency and accessibility as a government agency and is one of the best ways for residents to report non-emergency issues and find helpful information about Kern County's various services and departments.

This application allows the public to report issues, submit service requests, receive information, and access information from any county department.

“MyKern” is currently installed on all Park Rangers county-issued phones as a secondary method of reporting issues.

F7. Kern County high schools and colleges are a good source for recruitment into the Park Rangers Program.

The Kern County Sheriff’s Office agrees with this finding.

The Kern County Sheriff’s Office Human Resources Recruitment Team will begin a media campaign for the position of Park Ranger and Security Attendant after July 1, 2024. The Park Ranger classification will not be fully integrated under the purview of the Kern County Sheriff’s Office until this time.

In 2022, the Kern County Sheriff’s Office established an extensive recruitment and staffing plan to hire new employees. The Office has rebranded its external website to appeal to a younger audience and expanded its community outreach efforts in hopes of bolstering staffing numbers. As a result of these efforts, the Office is seeing a noticeable increase in staffing numbers throughout the organization.

Due to our recruitment efforts, the Sheriff’s Office hired 238 new employees during fiscal year 23/24. We hope to expect similar results in filling Park Ranger vacancies for the next fiscal year.

Response to Recommendations:

R1. Speed bumps be installed on the main roads in the County Parks to decrease the speed of vehicles driving through the park by January 1, 2025.

Kern County Sheriff’s Office will work with Public Works, General Services, and other departments to evaluate the issue. The County will need to work with surveyors and engineers to determine the proper placement of speed bumps if funding is secured for the project.

Park Rangers will work to educate the public and to develop educational tools to reduce speeding in the county parks.

R2. Both the City and County review and evaluate the operating hours of the parks to reduce unwanted activities within the parks. Exemptions could be considered for special events at the parks. The review should be initiated by January 1, 2025.

The Kern County Ordinance establishes operating hours for county parks. The current operational time established is consistent with the majority of parks throughout California and provides the community with the maximum amount of time to enjoy the County’s natural resources.

Kern County Ordinance 13.04.100 – Parks – Closing Hours

A. Except as hereinafter provided in subsections 13.04.100(B), (C), and (D), and Sections 13.04.110 and 13.04.120, all public parks owned, or operated or maintained by the

county shall be closed to public use and occupancy between the hours of ten (10:00) p.m. and five (5:00) a.m.

B. Exceptions. The closing hours provided by subsection 13.04.100(A) shall not apply to the following park areas, to wit: Greenhorn Mountain; Tehachapi Mountain and Buena Vista Aquatic Recreational Area; and designated camping areas only of Kern River County Park Campground.

C. Exception. The Frank L. Stramler Group Picnic Area, located at the Metropolitan Recreation Center, shall be closed to public use and occupancy between the hours of twelve (12:00) midnight and five (5:00) a.m. The provisions of Sections 13.04.110 and 13.04.120 are applicable to the requested use of the Frank L. Stramler Group Picnic Area between the hours of twelve (12:00) midnight and five (5:00) a.m.

D. Exception. The closing hours provided by subsection 13.04.100(A) above shall not apply to parking lot areas used with multiple-day park events, as authorized by the director.

E. Any person who uses or occupies a park when closed to the public in violation of this section is guilty of an infraction and is also subject to an administrative penalty under Chapter 8.54 of this Code.

R3. Develop an MOU with outside vendors, e.g., Work Release Program to monitor the maintenance of parks in outlying areas of Kern County by September 2024. This would help with staffing shortages.

Park maintenance is the responsibility of County General Services. This recommendation has been forwarded to them for their consideration.

Work Release currently has several agreements in place, including some with General Services. Expanding the Work Release Program to include more park maintenance is not a viable option due to the number of participants, the current workload, and the number of employees assigned to oversee the program.

R4. Staffing of security personnel at County Buildings be reviewed for efficiency and better utilization of County Rangers by September 1, 2024.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office is currently reviewing the MOU agreements with all the county departments where Park Rangers provide security. The Kern County Sheriff's Office will continue to review building security options to provide the best option for those buildings.

R5. Kern County Rangers and Bakersfield City Park Rangers contact high schools and colleges throughout Kern County to inform students of the opportunities of joining the Rangers Programs to help with staffing recruitment, beginning September 1, 2024.

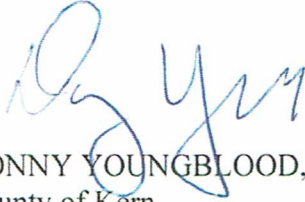
The Sheriff's Human Resources Recruitment Team will begin a media campaign after July 1, 2024, when the Park Rangers are fully integrated under the purview of the Kern County Sheriff's Office. Part of their recruitment plan involves local high schools and colleges.

June 27, 2024

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The Sheriff's Office has already started some of the hiring process so we can be ready to fill the vacant positions after July 1, 2024. The Kern County Sheriff's Office does not control the City of Bakersfield's staffing or hiring.

Sincerely,



DONNY YOUNGBLOOD, Sheriff-Coroner
County of Kern

CC: Kern County Grand Jury Foreman Melissa H. Brown
Undersheriff Larry McCurtain
Chief Deputy David Stephens
Chief Deputy Erik Levig
Chief Deputy Todd Bishop
Chief Deputy David Kessler
Chief Deputy Cindy Cisneros
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
CAO Chief Administration Officer Elsa Martinez
CAO Chief Operations Officer Stacy Kuwahara
CAO Compliance and Accountability Officer
Chief Human Resources Officer Tracey Eldridge
County Counsel Margo Raison
Chief General Services Officer Geoffrey Hill