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What Works

Government by Numbers: How CitiStat's hard data and straight talk saved Baltimore

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Government by Numbers

How CitiStat's hard data and straight talk saved Baltimore *by Noah Weiss*

"If you're not measuring it, you're not managing it," says Matthew Gallagher, director of Baltimore's CitiStat program.

When Martin O'Malley became mayor of Baltimore in 1999, he inherited the most drug-addicted and violent city in America. For the previous 10 years, Baltimore had also been losing more jobs and population than any other major American city. Mayor O'Malley responded by launching CitiStat – a system for collecting data from each of the city's departments, poring over the data with department heads every other week, setting goals based on the data, and then holding city officials responsible for meeting those goals.

"We did it to survive. We did it to stop the bleeding," O'Malley said in a speech at the IBM Center for the Business of Government. The speech appears in the Winter 2005 issue of the center's newsletter, *The Business of Government*. "Nobody – rich or poor, black or white, Democrat or Republican – wants to live in a city that's becoming progressively more dangerous, more dirty, and more unhealthy."

The city of Baltimore paid a little more than $20,000 for the CitiStat software (Microsoft Excel and ArcView Geographic Information Systems [GIS] mapping programs), hardware, and meeting room furnishings; and approximately $285,000 for the first year start-up and operating costs. Today, CitiStat's annual budget is $450,000, most of it for salaries. With this relatively small outlay, CitiStat has generated more than $43 million in cost savings and added revenues, report Phineas Baxandall and Charles C. Euchner in a Kennedy School of Government paper. That's a considerable amount, considering that Baltimore's annual budget is around $2 billion.

Gallagher adds, however, that this estimate is conservative because it doesn't account for improvements in city services. And "the service dividend is what we're most proud of," he says. With CitiStat on board, the city has increased drug-treatment services, decreased its backlog of cleanup projects, planted more trees, and removed more lead from homes, write Baxandall and Euchner. Overtime and absenteeism in city departments have also fallen, saving the city money, they report.

And although it is difficult to attribute more global changes to CitiStat alone, during the first four years of the program, Baltimore saw the biggest reduction in violent crime and the second-largest reduction in drug-related emergency room visits of any city in America. Moreover, the average sales price of homes in Baltimore nearly doubled, from $69,000 to $131,000. And in 2005, there was $7.2 billion in new construction in a city that in the 1990s had zero private investment, said O'Malley in his speech.

These successes have not come from dramatically restructuring government services. Instead, they arose from iterative improvements on a myriad of small problems. "Most of it is simply by making government work again," said O'Malley.

Mapping Progress

O'Malley ran his election campaign on a platform of improving public safety. During his initial review of the city's departments, he found that "local government had been given a free pass on the sorts of things that if you did them in business, you wouldn't be in business for very long," he said. He and his deputies created CitiStat to make every part of Baltimore's government accountable.

O'Malley introduced the first version of CitiStat in the Baltimore Police Department. The program was modeled on CompStat, a crime-fighting system that Jack Maple developed for the New York Police Department. CompStat integrates the city's crime data and plots them on city maps. Police officers use the maps to discern patterns in criminal activity, with the goal of reducing it. For example, when police see that gang activity has increased on a city block, they schedule extra patrols there. Or if they see that an abandoned building is attracting criminals, they shut it down.

The new mayor soon realized this crime-fighting program could help other city departments discern and fix problems. When the department of health had a backlog of restaurants that needed inspecting, for instance, CitiStat mapped the areas of the city needing the most urgent help so that human resources staff could prioritize health inspec-

INSTILLING EVIDENCE-BASED GOVERNANCE

- Collect and use high-quality data
- Closely monitor results
- Hold department heads accountable for results
- Nurture dialogue across departments

The Baltimore Bureau of Solid Waste presents to Mayor O'Malley, deputy mayors, and cabinet members at its biweekly CitiStat meeting. R.T. Rybak, mayor of Minneapolis, also sits in on the meeting.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAY L. BAKER

tor assignments. O'Malley soon added 18 other departments to the CitiStat program.

The core of CitiStat is not just its technology – which is mostly off-the-shelf and relatively cheap – but also its biweekly staff meetings. The head of each city department, the CitiStat staff, and staff from the mayor's office – often including O'Malley – attend the meetings, making it easier to cross boundaries within the bureaucracy. Meetings last one to two hours in a room with two 6-by-10 screens that display graphs and charts of recent performance data. Each department has a dedicated CitiStat analyst who is responsible for assembling the data, maps, and graphs, as well as setting the meeting agenda, moderating questions during the meeting, and reviewing the meeting afterward to set goals for the next one. Meetings focus on operations, customer service, and budgets.

CitiStat's success is due largely to the "perseverance of questioning" during each meeting, concludes Robert Behn, chair of the Kennedy School's Executive Education Program on Driving Government Performance, in a 2005 *International Public Management Journal* article. "The agency head knows that the questions asked today – and, more important, the answers given – will provide the foundation for the questioning two weeks from now," he writes.

At first, the extra accountability was difficult for some department heads. "There was definite apprehension in the beginning," says Gallagher. "People were unaccustomed to this level of openness and transparency, unaccustomed to marshaling this level of data, typically every 14 days." But after five years in the system, "effective managers really love it," he says.

Poison and Potholes

Baltimore now applies the CitiStat system to problems ranging from the life threatening to the merely annoying. Before CitiStat, Baltimore had one of the highest rates of child lead poisoning in the country. Yet in the previous 10 years, the city had not taken a single action to enforce its own rules for keeping children safe from lead.

O'Malley created a "LeadStat" team with workers from the housing, health, and environmental departments. The team mapped a red dot for each case of lead poisoning in the city – a process that revealed which neighborhoods had the highest lead-poisoning rates. This enabled the city to target its resources more effectively than it had in the past, when its interventions were more scattershot. In four years, Baltimore reduced the number of children who tested positive for lead exposure by 80 percent.

Although less tragic than lead poisoning, potholes were one of Baltimore's most common complaints. With CitiStat, city officials could see a map of Baltimore with icons showing the potholes. City workers can now click on each pothole icon to see who filed the complaint, when it was filed, when it was fixed, and who supervised the crew that fixed it. The outcome of this transparent process: 90 percent of potholes get fixed within 48 hours.

The pothole initiative was so successful that Baltimore created an expanded version of the service, called CitiTrak, in March 2002. Before CitiTrak, citizens who wanted to report a problem or grievance to city services had to look through a "help" sheet with 143 numbers. When they did succeed in contacting the right department, they rarely received feedback about the fate of their call.

With CitiTrak, citizens can now call just one number, 311, to lodge their complaints and concerns. CitiTrak issues the caller a tracking number, funnels the request to the right department, and traces whether and how long until the department responds to the call. City workers then make follow-up calls to gauge customer satisfaction; they use this feedback to measure department performance weekly. This system not only holds departments accountable to citizens, but also provides "fresh data on trends and issues of concern to the city," report Baxandall and Euchner.

The press, academia, and cities around the world have offered their praises to CitiStat. In 2004, the program was one of five winners of the Innovations in American Government Awards, a $100,000 grant given by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard and the Council for Excellence in Government. In 2005, *Time* named O'Malley as one of the country's five best big-city mayors.

"CitiStat is helping us replace a culture of delay and avoidance with a culture of accountability and results," summarized O'Malley. "It puts information into the hands of many managers, rather than a few. And this shared knowledge allows government to change and adjust more quickly to better serve the public." □