The Role of Citizen Advisory Groups in Government Performance Measurement[1]

Background

When governments evaluate their performance, they tend to report statistics about their operations and measure inputs (e.g. dollars spent, vehicles purchased, applications received) and outputs (e.g., tons of garbage collected, asphalt laid). In recent years, however, they have begun to identify some outcomes of their efforts, (e.g., how passable the streets are after snow removal). But does the public measure government performance in the same manner?

More than a decade ago, the Fund for the City of New York's (FCNY) Center on Municipal Government Performance began studying and identifying how the public evaluates local government performance. The most significant finding of their research was that people judge government performance in ways that are often quite different from standard performance measures on which governments tend to report.

Some of the differences include the following:
- An individual's personal interactions with government employees, particularly an initial encounter with an agency, define how that individual judges the agency.
- People believe that certain government services are better in affluent neighborhoods.
- People rarely complain about taxes, but deeply resent poor performance, "goofing off," or being treated disrespectfully.
- People ultimately feel powerless to improve the delivery of city services.

These findings led to the conclusion that it is important to supplement data issued by local governments to measure their performance with data gleaned from residents' own perceptions of local problems and how well they are being addressed.

The new measures of, and reports about, local government performance should reflect the following:
- The public's ratings of the nature of their personal interaction with government agencies and employees. These ratings should include: accessibility, courtesy, knowledge, friendliness, and responsiveness;
- The whole range of observable street – level conditions, such as broken sidewalks, litter, and abandoned vehicles, regardless of which agency is responsible for them;
- The public's view of the quality of work performed;
- Outcomes by neighborhood
- The extent to which the public receives feedback about complaints they have reported.

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Methodology

In order to get the public's input on government performance measures for the
Middle Cities Initiative, Pioneer Institute contracted with the Worcester Regional Research Bureau because of its work on benchmarking government performance in Worcester since 2001. The Research Bureau's role was to conduct sessions with a broad cross-section of community constituencies in eight of the fourteen Middle Cities. The participants were recruited by Pioneer Institute (except in Worcester, where they were selected by The Research Bureau).

Roberta Schaefer, President of The Research Bureau, led each of the Citizen Advisory
Groups in a discussion about what performance measures participants would like to see benchmarked in four public policy areas:
- Public safety
- Economic development
- Financial management
- Public education

To gather the participants' opinions, Dr. Schaefer asked one question for each of the four policy areas:
- How can we tell if you live in a safe city?
- How can we know if your city's economy is growing?
- Is your city's financial position healthy?
- How effective are your city's public schools in educating their students?

Each question was followed by a 60-90minute session, designed to reach a consensus on the most important performance measures for that policy area. At the beginning of each session, the participants were asked to write down 5 to 10 ideas for gathering data about the area to be measured. Participants were given five minutes to generate ideas (assuming no cost restraints or inaccessibility of data). There was no group discussion during this part of the program.

Dr. Schaefer gathered the participants' ideas in turn. Each person was allowed to propose one idea during each turn. The ideas were printed on a flip chart. The printed pages were hung on a wall to enable every participant to see them. When a participant had no more ideas, he/she passed. Dr. Schaefer continued gathering ideas until no one had any more suggestions. (There were usually about three rounds of suggested measures.)

Dr. Schaefer then led the group in a discussion to probe each idea in more depth. Similar ideas were grouped together. The group generally identified some new categories which covered several ideas. The participants voted to determine which sets of ideas were most important for measuring the area of government performance under discussion.

Advantages and Limitations of Citizen Advisory Groups

Many of the government performance measures suggested by members of the Citizen
Advisory Groups were similar to the measures used by governments to evaluate their own performance. For example, when judging a city's safety, citizens want statistics on types of crimes and crime trends, recidivism rates, response times to 911 calls, and number of public safety personnel per capita. All of

these data are available through federal, state, and local sources and databases. But the public's view of government performance goes beyond publicly available databases. As noted earlier, people's views are formed by their personal experiences, e.g., the nature of the interaction when they are stopped for a traffic violation, or perceptions of how safe they feel, which, may be influenced by such factors as news stories, or poor street lighting.

In other words, the regularly recorded data which can be tracked over time and compared to data from other cities may show that a city is relatively safe and even show year over year improvements, but that may not be the public's perception of its safety.

Measuring these perceptions and feelings requires the development of new performance measures, which can be both time consuming and labor intensive. For example, to assess the nature of police – community interactions, The Research
Bureau in its work in Worcester developed two measures. The first was a survey of participants in Worcester's more than fifty crime watch groups. The second measure was a general citizen satisfaction survey of municipal services.
The survey results enable municipal officials to understand and measure the performance of law enforcement officials from the viewpoint of individuals who have had casual encounters with the police.

These kinds of performance measures complement the hard data, and enable local officials to take account of the public's perspective when measuring government performance. The reality is that the public's perspective on government performance varied from the government's view of its own performance in the other public policy areas discussed as well. For example, when asked for measures of government performance in economic development, members of the Citizen Advisory Groups mentioned the commercial tax base and tax rate, the value of new construction and the number of permits pulled. But they also wanted to measure the ease of the permitting process and the "curb appeal" or street level conditions of the city, e.g. condition of streets and sidewalks, number of vacant storefronts, and abandoned vehicles, and the extent of litter and illegal dumping.

Again, for the public, their perceptions of the physical appeal of a neighborhood and their experiences in conducting business with the City are as important as hard data about government's performance in helping expand the economy.

In summary, citizen advisory groups can provide a different and valuable perspective to government performance measurement. If public officials can take account of the citizen's viewpoint when measuring government performance, they may find a more satisfied and better informed public.