

Syracuse, NY

Case in Brief

In June 1996, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University formally established the Community Benchmarks Program (CBP) as part of the Alan K. Campbell Public Affairs Institute. The mission of the CBP is to collect and disseminate information that describes community conditions, encourages citizen participation, fosters civic discourse and provide a basis whereby the public, private, and non-profit sectors can improve the quality of life within Onondaga County.

Onondaga County, on which the project is based, consists of nineteen towns, fifteen villages, and the City of Syracuse. A Mayor and a Common Council govern the City, while a Town Supervisor and a Town Board govern the Towns. What follows are the results of a series of studies conducted by the CBP. Four studies were undertaken during an eighteen-month period. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation awarded the Maxwell School a three-year grant totaling \$579,000. During this period, the benchmarking criteria were revised to assess local government performance in the following five areas:

- Crime Control
- Fire Protection
- Parks: Safety and Maintenance
- Solid Waste Collection
- Street Condition: Maintenance and Snow Removal

It is difficult to discern whether the responses of the citizens during the initial contact reflected their true perceptions of local government. What became apparent during this exercise was that most of the measures selected by the researchers were of little interest to the citizens. Regarding six predetermined measures, interest was expressed in only police services.

Background indicators provide socioeconomic information pertaining to each of the twenty municipalities. They should be considered when determining the appropriate level of performance for each governing body. Data for twelve background indicators was taken from the U.S. Bureau of Census. Qualitative indicators identify the exemplars municipal officials should strive to meet. Each indicator establishes a clear level or type of performance for local municipalities. For the purpose of this study, qualitative indicators were confined to types of goal-related activities, were used as tools to improve performance. Two examples are the use of customer surveys and clearly written guidelines that are readily available to the public. Data for these indicators came from the municipal surveys. The total number of qualitative indicators was nineteen. Finally, quantitative indicators offer information on the amount and type of activity, in addition to the resources required to support an activity. Citizens and officials in each municipality can use the information to compare, over time, their respective municipalities' historic records, or to contrast their municipalities with others. All but two indicators emanate from the municipal survey. The two indicators are: (1) assessment error/coefficient of dispersion and (2) assessor certification. The New York State Division of Real Property Services provided data for these indicators. The total number of indicators in this area was also nineteen.

The studies demonstrate the use of benchmarking through a presentation of qualitative and quantitative indicators and overall municipal grades. These two areas were chosen as demonstration studies because the comprehensive set of indicators was developed for each, and reliable data were collected. Municipal comparisons were then provided in the areas of: (1) clerk, (2) code enforcement, (3) financial management, (4) highways/streets, and (5) parks and recreation. These selected indicators for each of the five areas further serve as a framework to devise a more comprehensive list of measures.

The project's initial goal was revised to produce an annual report that would compare government performance in the five areas and publish them after the first year. Following a June 1997 meeting convened by Sloan, it was decided to explore a variety of strategies to develop an approach that would use benchmarks to improve government services in a way that was comprehensible and supported by stakeholders. Customer surveys were used for select areas. The goal of using benchmarking for community problem-solving as the focal point of the project was postponed in order to concentrate on improving government performance. A dual approach was adopted by working with government officials in a total quality management framework, while involving the media and the public in certain instances as a way to pressure government for better performance. Data on benchmarks was collected for all of the towns in the county.

Lessons learned -The first disappointment encountered had to do with the results of the Citizens' Survey, which indicated high levels of satisfaction in the five government service areas and extremely small variations across different geographical areas. While these results were viewed positively by the Mayor's office, critics believed it to be a whitewash. To CBP, the results were an indication that little had been done to measure that which could have served as a catalyst to improve government performance, either directly or through the pressure of stakeholders. It appeared to represent a lack of any real knowledge of government services by citizens.

CBP learned that relating community perceptions through general public surveys on performance measures is difficult, if not impossible. It makes little sense to ask people how government is doing in the five general areas, as most people do not directly use, for example, fire and police services. Even for those services citizens use regularly, such as garbage collection, the public is unlikely to have a viewpoint regarding such services. The conclusion is that there is a role for citizen surveys, but only with respect to individuals who are direct clients of specific services. This could include applicants for zoning permits, or individuals who have called their police or fire departments for service. It seemed as though focus group discussions, similar to those conducted by the Fund for the City of New York, also a Sloan Foundation recipient, might have been a viable approach. It is one, however, that CBP had chosen not to follow given resource constraints.