

FUND FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Background

The Fund for the City of New York was established in 1968 as a non-partisan, private, and independent operating foundation. The Fund's mandate is to be responsive to the problems of New York City and to opportunities to improve the performance of its government and the quality of life for its citizens. Through its Center on Municipal Government Performance (CMGP), established in 1995 with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the organization uses new technologies and applications of traditional market research techniques to create quantifiable performance measurements based on the public's concerns and experiences.

This case study describes an initiative by the Fund's Center to incorporate citizens' views into the way that government services are assessed. The study discusses the goals, processes, and outcomes between the Center, city engineers, community members – riders, drivers, and pedestrians - to develop objective measurements regarding the State of New York City streets.

Developed by the City's Department of Sanitation to measure the cleanliness of city streets, a Scoreboard system was first used successfully by the Fund in 1973. The Scoreboard System provides a basis for advancing the art of performance measurement in government by measuring quantifiable, accurate, and reliable information regarding the outcome of service delivery. The Scoreboard system uses rating scales, guidelines, and reporting systems to provide government with the knowledge it requires to assess, monitor, report, adjust, and improve core services.

The Fund has also worked with the Department of Parks and Recreation since the 1970s, and the City's Board of Education to establish a Scoreboard system.

The lessons learned from these projects led to the use of the Scoreboard system as a means of evaluating methodologies for developing and sustaining measures for assessing City government's performance. The Fund's goal was to correct the imbalance that exists between the way outsiders such as independent auditors, oversight bodies, and operating foundations and the current field of performance measurement that seems oriented toward providing the information managers want, rather than information that reflects the views and concerns of the public or is useful or accessible to citizens.

The Center thus embarked upon this new initiative to develop and apply technologies and methodologies that provide reliable, non-partisan, objective information about the effectiveness of New York City's government. This information will be available on a regular basis, reflecting the critical concerns, views and, values of the public, it will be accessible and understandable to the public government, and other interested groups.

What were the initial start-up costs?

While we know that the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Municipal Government Performance started with a Sloan grant in 1995, there is no mention as to the initial start-up costs.

What is the citizen perception of local government?

The work undertaken by Fund's Center is an effort to improve the overall performance of government and to involve the public in solving the City's problems. The public's involvement, it is hoped, will result in reduced cynicism and apathy towards the government as well as improvements in the quality of life of the City's residents themselves. The intent is to influence the improvement of municipal government performance and to understand it better.

Why did you choose a particular service?

The Fund's Center focused on services of critical importance to citizens in order to allow it to secure sound information on a limited area rather than attempt to spread itself too thin by trying to create and verify new indicators for the entire City of New York.

The City's first order was to listen to its citizens. Fifteen focus groups were designed and held to meet the following criteria:

- Respondents were drawn from all 5 boroughs of the City
- A range of neighborhoods were selected from which to recruit participants. These neighborhoods served to ensure representation of 2 critical elements: socioeconomic status and ethnicity
- Professional recruiters contacted neighborhood residents by telephone and sometimes in person, securing information regarding demographic qualification to ensure that the potential participants met the requirements

151 people from 29 different community districts were interviewed and included: Generation Xers, Baby Boomers, Senior Citizens and others; participants with different socioeconomic status; men and women of many racial and ethnic groups including, African-American, Caribbean American, Hispanic, Asian, Native and European descent.

The following questions were posed to the participating citizens:

- How do citizens determine whether a service is being delivered well or not?
- Where do citizens get information about the way that services are delivered?
- Is there a difference between the way people rate a service and the way government rate it?
- Is there a difference between the way people rate a service and the way they talk about it or experience it?

What indicators did you use as measures of performance or to determine outcomes?

Citizens' responses served as indicators for some of the services that they considered to be of critical importance. The focus groups were informed of the range of services that the City of New York performs. Discussions centered on those functions performed by mayoral agencies and the work of 3 authorities: Health and Hospitals Corporation, Transit Authority and the Housing Authority. A fourth, the Board of Education was included.

What process (es) was initiated?

Services were combined according to categories that the Mayor's office uses and were presented on cards: one deck of 33 cards per participant. Before the discussion, each participant was asked to write down how important each service was and score it in terms of how well they thought the function was being performed. These activities helped to focus the subsequent discussion.

When citizens identified services as critically important, efforts were made to explore their feelings to determine how well the citizens thought that the City was doing in that area and how well.

Participants identified the condition of the City's streets as critical, and regardless of socioeconomic status or race/ethnicity, New Yorkers viewed the condition of City streets as a significant measure of City government performance overall. Their personal experiences formed the basis for their judgments in that the conditions of the streets and the quality of maintenance by the presence of potholes and bumpy streets and what results from them such as vehicle damage and palpable discomfort.

Furthermore, poor road conditions have been costly. For instance, in 1996, the New York City Comptroller's Office reported that the City paid in excess of \$16 million in 411 settlements and judgments for roadway related claims. Additionally, ORTECH Corporation, a Canadian research-engineering firm, has estimated that the roughness of the streets of the City of New York cuts the structural life of a transit bus in half compared with the same model driven on the streets of major Canadian cities. Considering that 2.1 million motor vehicles pass through 32 key roadways alone on a typical weekday, street maintenance was clearly a municipal service ripe for an innovative approach to performance measurement.

Who have been involved in initiating, developing and using performance measurement?

- A total of 151 members from 5 boroughs representing 29 communities in the City of New York
- City Managers and the team from the Center on Municipal Government Performance

- DYG, Inc., a Danbury, Connecticut renowned social research firm which designed and conducted focus groups to identify City services in need of new citizen-driven performance measurements
- Galaxy Technology Group, a 10 year-old high technology company providing systems integration, engineering and other technical services and product development to the Departments of Transportation, Defense, and Commerce, the Federal Aviation Administration, and commercial clients

What obstacles did you encounter throughout the process?

The only obstacle noted was the difficulty measuring and tracking road conditions for a city of 75,766 blocks in 5 boroughs. Furthermore, after consulting with New York City government to confirm that measures reflecting the riding experiences of the public would be valuable, the Center conducted a worldwide search of transportation literature using via the use of experts and the Internet. Surprisingly, the Center could not locate a city that routinely measured and reported to the public on the smoothness and bumpiness of its streets. Most research was conducted for high-speed highways, airport runways and environments that have little in common with the heavy stop and go traffic conditions of city streets. The Center had unexpectedly embarked upon a novel area for research.

The Center tested several technologies and found the Profilometer to consistently produce reliable roughness measures at variable speeds under typical road conditions. The device uses laser technology to scan the streets' surface, counting and measuring every dip and rise encountered as an indication of potholes, bumps, misaligned utility covers, uneven repairs and more. This data was then converted into a city roughness index.

Has the community recognized any immediate benefits?

a. If so, what are these immediate benefits?

From the Profiler data, the Center produced 2 indicators of road conditions that New York City residents identified as meaningful to them:

- Number of significant jolts per mile
- Street smoothness score

As a result, the Street Smoothness project has led to the following:

- Introduction of a new performance measure considered critical by the public
- Assessment of street conditions, shifting from the exclusive perspective of government engineers towards the viewpoint of drivers, riders and pedestrians. In essence, an assessment from the perspective of those who use the City streets daily
- Non-judgmental and purely objective measurements of street profile
- Government and the public now securing easy to understand information about the rideability of City streets

b. What have you determined to be the long-term benefits?

The Fund launched a Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking System (ComNet) in 1998 to provide easily handheld computers to neighborhood volunteers so that they could better rate the outcome of service delivery in New York City. ComNet now uses digital cameras to document street level environmental conditions such as potholes, abandoned vehicles and faulty fire hydrants. These observations can be quickly sent in standardized form to City agencies and neighborhood groups. As a follow-up, community representatives perform assessments to track agency responses and identify new problems by using the following questions:

- What have you determined to be the long-run benefits?
- Is the new system being used consistently?
- Has the use of the new system led to improvements in road conditions or smoothness of the roads?
- Has the use of the new system led to a reduction in the number of legal suits lodged against the Department of Transportation?

What were the lessons learned?

One lesson learned is the value of using technology to collect data for outcome indicators that require scientific measurement. Use of the Profilometer was considered appropriate since such equipment usually provides accurate and reliable data. Harry Hatry points out that “it maybe the only reasonable way to achieve completely credible information on important environmental outcomes, road conditions. Programs can also obtain subjective outcome data using trained observers or user surveys to assess the quality of roads...but such information is; likely to lack the credibility provided measurement.” Hatry also cautions, however, that “technical equipment can be expensive to procure, operate and maintain. In addition, the information obtained must be interpreted to be useful to program personnel and outsiders.”

What one thing would you recommend to a community which is considering this process?

No such information was noted in the report.

If you were to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

No such information was noted in the report.