

Worcester, MA

Case in Brief

In 1999, the Worcester, Massachusetts, Municipal Research Bureau received a three-year planning grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to:

- Connect government goals to community results
- Produce a comprehensive municipal data inventory
- Utilize benchmarking data to help the City achieve its goals

Maximizing community involvement was the first step in the planning efforts. Early in the grant period, three advisory groups were assembled to support community leaders and neighborhood representatives who had contributed to the development of preliminary performance measures, all of which were based upon the City's strategic plan. These representatives from Worcester's neighborhood associations and community development corporations played a key role in helping to refine the performance measures, developed accurate maps of Worcester's neighborhoods and participated in public forums which focused upon developing strategies for revitalizing Worcester's neighborhoods.

The Research Bureau then turned its attention to a systematic review of the performance measures literature, and visited and consulted with individuals who have been engaged in other Sloan Foundation citizen-driven performance projects. During these visits, the Research Bureau learned about each project and received feedback and suggestions regarding their performance measures.

Partnerships have also been developed with community leaders in Hartford, CT; Providence, RI; and Springfield, MA, cities similar in population to Worcester. The goal was to encourage their continued participation in these projects so that all four cities could compare their performance on issues of common concern.

Other partnerships were established with the United Way of Central Massachusetts and the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, which have been participating in a complimentary effort designed to measure community health in Central Massachusetts. In exchange for some financial support, the Research Bureau agreed to collect social, economic and public health data for Worcester and approximately 30 nearby towns. The indicators will include each community's income and occupational makeup, type and availability of housing, rate of infant mortality, teen pregnancy and prevalence of infectious diseases. These foundations will now have information to make informed decisions regarding community needs and to determine which projects to support. Besides adding a regional dimension to the project, the Research Bureau can now compare Worcester's performance to that of its neighbors. This will provide additional funding and help ensure that the project continues well beyond the three-year grant period.

In order to measure municipal performance at both the citywide and neighborhood levels, the Research Bureau worked extensively with officials from the City's Office of Planning and Community Development and the Worcester Police Department, as well as neighborhood advisory groups to develop maps defining the City's neighborhoods.

Indicators were designed to assess progress towards achieving the five goals contained within the City's strategic plan (developed in 1994 by citizens appointed by the city manager):

The Economic Development goal identifies growth in the City's tax base and job creation as its two primary objectives. Measures are:

- Growth of commercial and residential tax base
- Municipal Tax Rate
- User-Friendliness of Business Permitting Process
- Downtown Commercial Property Vacancy Rate
- Job Growth
- Amount of Private Investment
- Abandoned and Distressed Property

Performance indicators for the Public Safety goal:

- Crime Rate and Clearance Rate by Type of Crime
- Police Community Relations
- Allegations of Police Misconduct

Emergency Services Response Times Municipal Services indicators are:

- Citizen Satisfaction with the delivery of services
- Snow Clearance Effectiveness
- Citizen Involvement
- Library Usage
- Physical Condition of Neighborhoods
- Effectiveness and Cost Efficiency of Municipal Services

The indicators for the Education goal are:

- Level of Parent Involvement in Public Schools
- Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Scores
- Attendance and Dropout Rates
- Post-Graduate Placement
- Local Employer Satisfaction with Worcester Public Schools
- Student Mobility

The following indicators focus on problems in the community reflecting the need for Youth Services:

- Presence of "At Risk Youth"
- Teen Pregnancy Rate
- Infant Mortality Rate
- Extent of Juvenile Crime

Concurrently with the development and refinement of performance measures, the Research Bureau engaged in identifying and developing data collection strategies and methods designed to generate reliable performance measurement data. Many of these performance indicators were readily available from federal, state, and municipal agencies. In addition, the Research Bureau works with each municipal department to develop mechanisms to ensure that self-reported data is accurate and collected in the same manner each year.

Written by Laura Steele and Marc Holzer. Reprinted with permission from the PA TIMES, monthly newspaper of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), www.aspanet.org.