DATA-DRIVEN GOVERNMENT IN ACTION

The most innovative governments have joined the open data movement to provide transparent public data to citizens. Giving the public access to datasets can drive economic development and increase overall citizen satisfaction.

What happens when a city or a government takes open data to that next level? When a city intentionally chooses specific metrics to track each goal, and then publicly publishes those goals — and the status of those goals — to its citizens, accountability and engagement increase. These data-driven insights enable cities and governments to increase efficiencies, quickly understand what is and is not working, and deliver better results.
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By Beth Blauer

For governments to play a leading role in the data revolution, performance measurement and successful delivery are mandatory. This truth is something I am passionate about. My passion resonates from my experience managing StateStat and the Delivery Unit in Maryland and is affirmed in conversations I have had with government leaders since.

Fortunately, the open data movement has resulted in tools for data-driven decision-making, performance, and delivery. Socrata's product, GovStat, helps local governments become more transparent, engage citizens, and measure progress against initiatives and goals. It also allows stakeholders to collaborate throughout the entire process on one common platform.

In Beyond Transparency: Open Data and the Future of Civic Innovation, I stressed the idea that it’s not a matter of if data-driven government can create the best solutions to society’s problems; it’s a matter of how soon governments will embrace the idea and reap the benefits. Using a tool like GovStat enables governments to collect and update data across departments, build beautiful data visualizations, and create both internal and citizen-facing dashboards to track progress.

I would like to highlight three government organizations that have chosen to use GovStat as their primary performance measurement solution. I will share their specific challenges in moving toward data transparency, why they chose GovStat as their solution, and how each organization plans to use GovStat to increase efficiency and accountability to their constituents.

TELLING THE STORIES THAT MATTER: COOK COUNTY, IL

In 2011, Cook County began a program to create a strategic plan around the use of open data for decision-making and communications. Andrew Schwarm, Chief Performance Officer of Cook County, was the project head tasked with finding a performance measurement tool.

“The county was publishing our quarterly reports in a PDF on our website, which was far from best practice,” Schwarm says.

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We wanted to transform our external performance reporting from a static PDF to a dynamic open data web portal. GovStat jumped out as the product that made the most sense for us.

An early adopter of the GovStat platform, Cook County decided on a two-phase implementation process. First, the County replicated the PDF data and created reports for each department. “GovStat allowed us to take the data already gathered and put it on a more flexible, user-friendly, open and transparent platform,” Schwarm says.

Once the data was updated and made available to the entire organization, Cook County entered phase two of implementation: using data to drive decisions. Schwarm is excited to track other county initiatives, including public safety and healthcare goals. “We plan to roll out one goal per month and continue to report on its progress,” Schwarm says. He continues, “The use of good, timely, accurate data, especially for a government facing tough fiscal situations, allows us to make decisions and prioritize at a high level.”

DYNAMIC REPORTING AND COLLABORATION: KANSAS CITY, MO

Kansas City, MO has been a leader in government transparency and data-driven government. Since taking office, Mayor James has convened regular KCStat meetings with his senior team and holds them accountable to the goals and strategies that are most important for the citizens of Kansas City. The technology behind this program began as their homebuilt performance measurement platform, KCStat. A year later, the City added Socrata’s open data portal.

As the program grew, the team found they were limited in their reporting abilities. So when Senior Performance Analysts Kate Bender and Julie Steenson began looking for a performance management solution to enhance KCStat, they knew GovStat would meet those needs.

Of all GovStat’s features, the KCStat team is particularly excited about the tool’s drag-and-drop reporting capabilities. “We already were on board with the concept of telling our story through data and improving government performance,” Bender says. “The only thing missing was the ability to create dynamic reports and data visualizations,” she continues.

Kansas City hopes to improve how they communicate their results to the larger community. The Kansas City council has always been dedicated to civic engagement. Each monthly council meeting is filmed, televised, and shared online, which attracts serious stakeholders. Still, the city wanted a way to communicate with every citizen, quickly and easily. They found the GovStat public-facing, or “citizen,” dashboard most useful. “The GovStat dashboard is a way to engage every stakeholder,” says Steenson. “It’s a storytelling device that makes the data more accessible.”

Kansas City launched its citizen dashboard in early October and looks forward to using the tool to make progress toward the city’s initiatives. “One big step forward was having the city council adopt a set of strategic priorities, which form the backbone of our dashboard,” says Steenson. “The next step was assigning measurements to those priorities,” she continues. “The council made a public statement about their priorities and then adopted specific measures to track.
progress. These metrics for tracking progress will be the advantage of the GovStat dashboard as we build it out.”

Kansas City plans to roll out a new goal every month over the next six months, into 2014. Residents can follow each goal’s progress on the citizen dashboard. In the meantime, Bender is excited to see how the tool helps improve efficiency. “Dynamic reporting saves so much time,” she says. “It’s great to work in a system designed around government use.”

TAKING PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT TO THE NEXT LEVEL: SAN MATEO COUNTY, CA

The San Mateo County government is known for its deep commitment to transparency. The County’s Shared Vision 2025, a comprehensive community planning process designed to get direct input from citizens, is a sterling example of this open, collaborative governing style. So when county residents approved a half-cent sales tax increase in 2012, the Board of Supervisors promised that residents would be able to see how their tax dollars were being spent.

Executives in the County Manager’s Office viewed the approval of the tax – known locally as Measure A – as an opportunity to take the county’s transparent, data-driven approach to budgeting to the next level. “The Measure A sales tax will generate about $65 million in revenue each year over the next 10 years,” says Reyna Farrales, Deputy County Manager for San Mateo County. “We have a duty to show how the services funded by the tax contribute to specific, measurable goals and how those results ultimately fit together with the priorities in our Shared Vision 2025.”

When voters approved the sales tax increase, county leaders began their search for a technology solution to keep the community informed about progress in the coming years. “We were aware of the success of the StateStat program in Maryland and were really impressed with the performance dashboard they were using,” says Farrales. “We discovered that Maryland, along with a number of other cities and states, were all using the Socrata platform. Our newly appointed Chief Innovation Officer (CIO) Jon Walton came from San Francisco and had experience with Socrata, so he and his staff were able to help us ramp up our Socrata-powered open data portal and move into GovStat right away.”

After implementing GovStat, the County Manager’s Office used the system to help departments define goals and metrics for their respective Measure A funding proposals. In September 2013, San Mateo County became the first county government in the U.S. to deploy a public-facing GovStat site. The launch of SMC Performance coincided with the Board of Supervisors’ approval of 22 projects totaling more than $50 million.

GOALS IN ACTION

Each of these organizations offers a compelling story of what is possible by putting the principles of data-driven decision-making, performance measurement, and delivery into action. Greater adoption of these practices is not a trend; it’s a fundamental shift in the way governments around the world are embracing their mission.