

Engaging Citizens in Oklahoma City to Improve Public Performance Reporting

PUBLIC REPORTING IS A KEY COMPONENT of transparency, integrity, and effective stewardship of public resources in local government. Performance reporting demonstrates not only how these resources are allocated, but also provides information on:

- The broad goals and objectives of the jurisdiction
- The performance of services in pursuit of those goals and objectives
- Strategies the city will use to reach or maintain explicit performance targets.

Cities and counties employ a wide range of performance reporting methods. Many include selected performance measures in annual budget documents. And as a comprehensive document of local government operations, the budget is well suited for performance information. Some jurisdictions publish standalone performance reports to communicate service metrics. These documents can be effective in articulating the inputs and outcomes of local services on an annual, quarterly, or monthly basis. Increasingly, local governments present performance information online, using data dashboards complete with historical and real-time performance data, allowing citizens to interact with service metrics in ways not possible with a printed publication.

Oklahoma City enhanced its performance reporting by soliciting direct citizen feedback in 2010 and 2011 on the quality and content of the city's publication. With the assistance of independent researchers, the city used focus groups to answer the following questions:

- Are we measuring and publishing performance data that citizens find important?
- Is the performance report effective in communicating service performance?
- What are the best avenues to distribute performance information to citizens?
- Are there other metrics important to citizens that we are not currently measuring?

Background and research findings

In 2010, Oklahoma City was awarded a grant by the National Center for Civic Innovation to participate in its Government Trailblazer Program. Through this program the city was encouraged to publish annual performance data and consider direct citizen feedback for subsequent reports. Following the publication of its *FY 2010 Performance Report*, Oklahoma City contracted with a local research team to follow up on the effectiveness of the publication. The core of the research came from focus group sessions where qualitative feedback and two-way conversations fostered insights not possible through standard surveys. The city also used this methodology to evaluate their FY 2011 report, where many suggestions from the focus groups were incorporated.

The focus group research indicated that the citizens found the report informative and understandable. Generally, citizens preferred concise reviews of service information and the use of graphs and tables to relay important data.

CASE PROFILE



Oklahoma City, OK

Population:
579,999

Square miles:
621

Median household income:
\$47,004

Form of government:
Council-manager

Focus group participants were also interested in seeing comparisons of performance numbers to yearly targets or historical figures, and Oklahoma City added that information in subsequent reports.

The focus group sessions also revealed that participants found the data being collected to be important and effective in communicating the city's progress. Even with a mix of satisfactory and less-than-satisfactory service performance, approximately half of the respondents' perceptions of the city government improved upon viewing the document. Suggestions beyond the scope of the actual report have since been acted upon by the city, such as:

- Launching an online performance data dashboard and short monthly "performance narratives" (mailed to all water department customers) for citizens interested in following the city's performance throughout the year
- Measuring the time it takes the city to resolve a code violation, a measure of more interest to citizens than mere response time to violation complaints
- Measuring ambulance response times, a service the city contracts out to a private service provider.

While the city no longer hosts focus groups, the feedback received from these sessions continues to support the need for citizen-focused performance measures and helps guide the design of the annual report. Annual performance reports are posted on the website, okc.gov, and include a link for citizens to review additional performance information using the online dashboard or to provide feedback.

Tips for performance reporting and focus group feedback

Several factors need to be considered when soliciting direct feedback from citizens using a focus group approach. First, many jurisdictions do not have staff with expertise in focus group methodology, so they need to engage an outside facilitator. Even if your jurisdiction has staff with the know-how, Oklahoma City officials suggest that using an independent facilitator gives participants a better perception of the process and the intentions of the city. It also limits the possibility that the conversation will veer off-track toward otherwise well-intended questions and comments relating to city issues or services that can arise if city staff is on hand.

If available, reach out to a local university to tap its expertise or network of researchers to ensure a rigorous approach to attaining focus group feedback. Assign a staff member to work closely with the researcher(s) in order to ensure that the facilitator asks the right questions and obtains useful feedback. Also, note that selecting participants for focus groups can be challenging, and the selection can affect the results. In the first year of using focus groups, Oklahoma City's independent researcher tapped neighborhood associations for participants. In the second year, researchers used random selections from lists of the city's utility customers. While the first approach is not improper, it can yield a group that is more civically active compared with a random selection.

Be sure to find out how citizens want to receive city performance information. Oklahoma City officials discovered that, while the annual performance document was well received, citizens were interested in learning about performance progress throughout the year. This was addressed by the launch of the dashboard and performance narratives. Finally, make sure to share the results with all departments, including citizens' suggestions of measures. Look for opportunities to act on these suggestions. Oklahoma City officials introduced citizen suggestions to all applicable departments (such as the code enforcement example above) during their biennial strategic business plan updates.

Conclusion

Whether or not your jurisdiction is new to performance reporting, consider direct citizen feedback to improve the effectiveness of your publications and website presentations. Using focus groups in the first few years can help improve your reports by matching its contents with citizen interests. You may also find other means by which citizens prefer to gain performance data as Oklahoma City did.

For more information on Oklahoma City's performance reporting and citizen feedback, contact Joanna McSpadden, assistant budget director, joanna.mcspadden@okc.gov.