

SFStat: City Hall runs the numbers

BY PHIL TRACY

ONE pleasant surprise of this dreary political season has been the blossoming of Gavin Newsom. Elected mayor with the tacit support of predecessor Willie Brown and the backing of downtown interests, his ascension seemed to herald another four years of business as usual.

Newsom, however, apparently wants to

do a decent job. Sanctioning same-sex marriages gained national headlines, and his focus on long-neglected Bayview-Hunters Point has even the most dispirited southeast resident optimistic.

One of Newsom's little-heralded but potentially far-reaching efforts is something he calls SFStat. Last summer, during the campaign, Newsom promised to bring in CitiStat, the citywide efficiency program Baltimore adapted from a New York Police Department management program credited with dramatically lowering the Big Apple's crime rate. "The whole premise of CitiStat," then-candidate Newsom told the Chronicle, "is to drive [using statistics] performance and accountability through every department of city government."

Baltimore agencies measure and map each job they do, then every two weeks report results to the administration's top executives in an open meeting. It puts department heads in a powerful spotlight, giving them a strong incentive to improve before the next meeting. Comparing the process to a fortnightly performance review, Baltimore's mayor momentarily seemed sorry for his department heads. "They're up against the wall, as it were," he told the Toronto Star. "This happens every week. It's relentless."

But the grilling sessions give

those same department heads immediate access to the people who can un-jam bottlenecks and publicly identify other departments that may be blocking their improvement. It also highlighted the department's waste and inefficiencies. Baltimore reported saving \$13.2 million the first year.

Newsom pledged to initiate the program, if elected, within the first 100 days of his administration. He held his first meeting April 14, 105 days into office.

Using statistics to map problems and find solutions has been around for 150 years. A doctor in London mapped out the deaths of several hundred cholera victims in 1854 and found they lived near one water pump. He removed the pump's handle and the epidemic ended.

Applying the technique to police departments began in earnest in 1993 when William Bratton, New York City's then-new police commissioner, instituted "CompStat." (The name comes from the International Association of Statistical Computing's annual symposium.) One cop called CompStat cultural shock. "It's the difference between responsibility and ownership," he said.

The underlying assumption of the Bratton management technique is that cops can affect crime, something that ran contrary to conventional thinking about policing techniques going back to the '70s. Describing the old system, Jane Perlow, formerly of New York and now police chief of Raleigh, N.C., said, "Basically, they put out fires and kept the lid on things while they were [there, and then they went home]."

During its first 2½ years under CompStat, NYPD went from blue to golden, reducing serious crime 39% and homicides 50%. From '93 to '98, homicides fell from 1,946 to 629.

In about a New York minute other departments around the country started copying the system. In Baltimore, major crimes dropped 27% in the first three years and an additional 12% the fourth. In Lawrence, Mass., such crimes have dropped 43% in the four years since it's been adopted; in Raleigh, they dropped 13% under Chief Perlow. According to a report on CompStat by the respected Police Foundation, by 2000 a third of the 515 largest police departments were using a CompStat-like program.

It was Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley who took the CompStat model and applied it citywide: to transportation, sanitation, social services, etc. He called it CitiStat and since his election in '99, Baltimore has logged some impressive accomplishments, particularly in his first 18 months: overtime cut \$6 million; 2,700 illegal dumping sites reduced to 200; 97% potholes repaired within 48 hours of being reported. A recent citation announcing it as a finalist for an "Innovations in Government Award," cited the program's five-year savings of \$20.9 million in overtime and \$9 million annually through contracting out city services to private vendors.

The initial cost to Baltimore: \$20,000 to renovate the hearing room and buy the computer software and \$285,000 to hire six employees to verify departmental stats.

Needless to say, a number of mayors have sought to emulate O'Malley's refinement. One thing they and Newsom have in common with O'Malley is their winning office as a challenger. The mayors of Pittsburgh; Saint Cloud, Minn.; Houston; Denver; St. Louis; New Haven, Conn.; Syracuse, N.Y., and, most recently, San Francisco all began the program directly after taking office.

Like Baltimore (pop. 700,000) before O'Malley, San Francisco's city government has hit a kind of nadir. The new fiscal-year budget is currently showing a deficit of \$300 million, which is going to require painful cuts in city services. The Police and Fire departments have again exhausted their overtime budgets with two months left to the calendar year. Among large cities, the school system is one of the poorest performing in California. The District Attorney's Office has the lowest conviction rate of all 58 jurisdictions. The Police Department has the lowest rate of clearance for murders of any county in the state. The Police Department has been hit by one public scandal after another for more than a year. The Fire Department is being investigated over reports of widespread drinking in the firehouses.

This doesn't even mention the Brown-bloated civic work force, the tax-credit giveaways, lobbying blunders and other financial time bombs strewn along the way that could blow up in Newsom's face.

San Francisco is in desperate need of governmental efficiency, and SFStat may be able to encourage that elusive character trait.

The data will be compelling, and how to interpret it will probably be clear. Whether the officials will choose to fix things, we'll have to wait and see. But at least they'll know what's wrong. ■

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