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## Quality of City Service Is Not Measured

By Christine Lidbury

WITH DEBATES brewing in City Hall over proposed spending cuts to help balance New York City's budget, it is more important than ever to be able to assess whatever effects budget cuts have on city programs and services. Unfortunately, the tools we have for doing this—the Mayor's Management Report and the Web-based Capstat—are woefully inadequate.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg acknowledged this problem in his first State of the City address, noting that the current management report has grown to over 1,000 pages with more than 4,000 statistics. Quantity is not the issue. The problem, as the mayor implied, is that despite their sheer volume, those statistics do not tell us much about the quality of government services.

To put this information in perspective, the City Council will hold a hearing Thursday on the structure and content of the Mayor's Management Report

The report and Capstat mainly present the day-to-day activities of city agencies: How many children were in the foster care system in December, "average weekly scheduled hours" for Queens libraries in March, how many "weights and measures" inspections were carried out by the Department of Consumer Affairs. These statistics may be important for managers, but they say little about what was achieved. Are at-risk children safer as a result of city child-welfare programs? Is the library in Hollis or Jackson Heights open the days and times residents most want to use them? Are consumers better protected from unscrupulous grocers?

What matters are results. The challenge is to measure and rate services from the citizens' perspective: How does the public see, use and benefit from city services? The City Council recently developed a survey to better understand how citizens view government's achievements. But public demand for information on how well the public sector performs is met largely by groups outside of government. The Straphangers Campaign, for example, informs the public about performance and service issues for the city's public transportation system in the absence of data from New York City Transit.

The city has had some success in reporting on things that matter to residents. The police department's nationally acclaimed Compstat program, which provides neighborhood-centered information on crime, is good example. In contrast, while the parks department compiles statistics on the conditions of local parks—certainly of prime interest to neighborhood residents—the agency only publishes citywide indicators. City government could be more accountable for changes in parks spending if, for example, a resident of Jamaica could go to a computer map and click on Cunningham Park and view a scorecard for that park (graffiti, lighting, pathways, litter, safety) and compare those ratings to other parks of similar size across the city.

But New York City now is in position to do a whole lot better. Mayor Bloomberg built a world-class reputation on packaging and prioritizing information for public consumption. If his administration applies this mindset to reporting on its own

performance, our city government can set the standard for communicating with the public.

Consulting citizens and other stakeholders about the kinds of measures they would like to see reported would itself be a big advance in public accountability. Different kinds of information are needed for different purposes. Ensuring value-for-money for the city's taxpayers means that much of the workload-type information about day-to-day activities may still need to be collected and published. Public accountability requires that it be complemented by measures that explain how these daily efforts translate into results: cleaner neighborhoods, safer streets, healthier children, reliable public transportation.

Management expert Harry Hatry of the Urban Institute likens managing city government to running a baseball team. Bobby Valentine keeps track of the score and team statistics to assess the adjustments needed for the Mets to win. Working with citizens, civic organizations, business leaders and others, City Hall needs to determine what elements make up its score. How do we know if we are winning? How do we know if we are getting what we are paying for?

As the mayor and City Council make hard choices about spending cuts to close the city's budget gap, how well city agencies "score" on service delivery is more important than ever. The lack of clear and accessible information that measures the quality of city programs and services limits what might be done to improve them—and hampers public debate on how and where scarce city resources are best spent.

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