

A New Standard for What Works in City Government

Bloomberg Philanthropies is providing a useful roadmap for results-oriented governance.

BY [STEPHEN GOLDSMITH](#) | DECEMBER 21, 2015

The movement to make government more data-driven has dramatically accelerated in the past decade. Yet its evolution has generated a newer, more interesting and challenging set of questions. Even when an elected official has a smart idea, he or she often faces considerable political obstacles in repurposing existing dollars into data-driven efforts. Both the seriousness of the public-sector problems and the scarcity of resources are driving public leaders to ask what actually works.

Shifting to better and more efficient programs requires large doses of evidence and leadership. Fortunately, cities across the nation are proving that these are in no short supply. More than 100 cities applied to participate in the Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative after it was announced this past April, and earlier this month 13 more cities were selected for participation, bringing the total to 21 so far.

What Works Cities is designed to help cities around the country improve their use of data and evidence in making decisions. Participating cities are using the "What Works Cities Standard," a roadmap to results-oriented governance, to guide their efforts. Developed in conjunction with leaders in the field, the standard includes four pillars that cities can target to expand their use of data:

- Commit to getting better results for residents by using data and evidence.
- Measure progress and engage citizens along the way.
- Take stock to measure progress, learn, and make corrections and improvements.
- Act on data and evidence for all major decisions.

This first element calls on city leaders to make powerful public commitments to get better results for their residents. In Jackson, Miss., for instance, Mayor Tony Yarber applied to participate in What Works Cities soon after taking office earlier this year. Shortly after Jackson was selected to join the cohort, he publicly committed to data-driven decision making and implemented an open-data policy. This process has been informing managers about the whereabouts of datasets within departments in an effort to overcome previous obstacles when one agency needs data from another.

City leaders must also use the data and tools at their disposal to measure progress and engage citizens. Kansas City, a leader in data use and performance management, enhanced its "KCStat" program by establishing a quarterly "Department Stat" report. Department Stat embeds performance goals into each city department, measuring their progress to ensure that their operational targets are aligned with the city's strategic objectives.

The third element of the framework holds leaders accountable. Cities often resist evaluating programs because of perceived time and cost, which too often results in ineffective, entrenched policies being saved from the chopping block. A commitment to thoughtful evaluation, however, can often lead to relatively quick solutions with meaningful impact. New Orleans, for example, is developing the capacity to conduct low-cost evaluations of its blight-reduction tactics to make sure resources are going where they are most effective.

Finally, city leaders should act on data and evidence. In Seattle, where Mayor Ed Murray has declared a civil emergency in response to the city's homelessness crisis, municipal leaders are working with What Works Cities to use performance-driven contracting to focus the city and outside providers who serve the city's homeless on outcomes and the most effective delivery of services.

At its heart, the What Works Cities Standard provides a practical framework that cities can use to improve their use of data and evidence in decision-making. Bloomberg Philanthropies' support of the Harvard Kennedy School's work on data-driven innovation will facilitate our research into lessons learned from the What Works Cities efforts as they unfold. So far, it's off to a promising start.



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