The stats program in Somerville, Massachusetts, is modeled after one of the earliest—Baltimore’s—with the knowledge that, sometimes, less is more.

Data analysts with the city government in Somerville, Massachusetts, want to know if residents see crime, city service and happiness trends the same way city hall does, so they ask them at fall ResiStat (http://somervilleresistat.blogspot.com/) community meetings—just one of the many arms of the city’s SomerStat (http://www.somervillema.gov/departments/somerstat) program.

A Medium-Size City’s Approach to Data
The performance management initiative—with its four staff members analyzing financial, personnel and operational data for actionable insights—keeps seven-term Mayor Joe Curtatone (http://www.joecurtatone.com/about-joe) abreast of departmental improvements in his city of nearly 80,000 residents, just outside Boston.

A senior fellow at Harvard University’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (http://ash.harvard.edu/), Curtatone advocates a top-down approach to performance management that gauges the effectiveness of government programs, policies and managers in real time using any number of inputs, including resident statistics.

“We believe in gathering data from every possible conduit,” Curtatone said in a webinar (https://exed.hks.harvard.edu/Programs/spr/overview.aspx) on Thursday.
The SomerStat Office was modeled off New York City’s CompStat and Baltimore’s CitiStat programs, Curtatone having visited Charm City’s “war room” and met with then-Mayor Martin O’Malley, who would later become Maryland governor and is currently a Democratic presidential candidate.

O’Malley’s advice: Don’t get bogged down in technicalities dealing with numbers every city government has at its disposal.

Curtatone took that to heart, passing on fancy, technical software and big rooms in favor of a small, dedicated team that engages collaboratively with the mayor and department heads.

“If we don’t have the right people to crunch the numbers, it just becomes an abstract set of numbers and doesn’t have much use,” Curtatone said.

Resistance to the culture shift to data-driven decisionmaking was expected, he added, but eventually “the crustiest of managers” were using data to justify resource requests at City Hall.

The mayor can’t make every meeting, but no longer does he have to because he receives daily briefings on city data.

Last winter’s 7 feet of snow in just over three weeks was met with a data push to determine how many times per week streets needed plowing and the most effective method for removal.

A centralized 311 customer service center provides numbers used to effectively fix potholes, remove graffiti and manage sanitation. Arrests are no longer viewed as a measure of success but failure, used to explore what’s
driving people to commit crimes.

Somerville was the first city in the world to measure happiness, Curtatone claims, and is well on its way to refining a well-being index like the one developed by Santa Monica, California (http://wellbeing.smgov.net/).

Service delivery from the tech employed to contractual outsourcing goes through SomerStat.

Thursday evening’s ResiStat meeting in the city’s Ward 6 will be the third this fall, one in each ward, and the agenda is shaped by the residents in attendance. By briefing citizens on relevant crime and 311 statistics, Somerville has made government more transparent and accountable.

Through the constituent service line, city staff learn when broken streetlight repairs are taking too long, and if a service-level agreement is not being met the responsible department is expected to have an idea as to why. That could mean there’s a contractual problem with a vendor, a staffing issue or a mistake has been made.

Potholes are supposed to be repaired within 48 hours.

SomerStat’s next improvement is upgrading from a static online dashboard, which can be used to both hold Somerville officials to their stated goals and rebuff perceptions of neighborhood service favoritism with hard numbers.

“We want you to have an interactive experience with our data,” Curtatone said.

(Photo by Eric Kilby (https://www.flickr.com/photos/ekilby/14379261625/) / Flickr.com (https://www.flickr.com/))
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