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Vaunted StateStat Falls Short of Real Accountability

By

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Taxpayers would like to believe that their money is being spent well and wisely - but for the most part, they believe it is not. That is why programs like CitiStat and StateStat that measure how efficient and effective government programs are have such appeal to elected officials and taxpayers alike.

In Baltimore, Mayor Martin O'Malley created the CitiStat program that relentlessly measured, month after month, how well city services were being delivered, from collecting trash to fixing potholes to treating drug addicts. Begun quietly, CitiStat became part of the mayor's national renown once it won an award from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Two years ago, he brought the performance measure to the much larger and more complex state government, at first with a focus on the most troubled departments.

How is StateStat working? From meetings I attended and interviews with participants,

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observers and outside experts, it appears to be working pretty well as a management tool for the nitty-gritty of government. "What gets measured gets done" is the mantra.

But most ordinary taxpayers wouldn't know what to make of StateStat. The departmental reports on its Web site drown you in a torrent of data. The governor rolled out StateStat with a promise to provide Marylanders "with open, transparent and timely information and data on state government agencies." But 30 to 40 pages of minutiae tracked over a few months do not tell you much without an interpreter.

What's missing are the charts, graphs and analytical questions produced by the small StateStat staff and found in the briefing memos that go only to the governor and his top staff. The agencies involved don't even get to see the memos, except for some graphs splashed on the walls of the conference room.

So as a tool for citizens to figure out how their government is performing, StateStat falls way short. The unanalyzed data dumps don't come close to providing real accountability. Other states - and even Montgomery County's less frequent reports in CountyStat - do a better job.

Besides the lack of analysis, there is also the question of whether StateStat is measuring the right things; after all, what doesn't get measured doesn't get done. Critics doubt that a preoccupation with the inputs of government programs - use of overtime and sick days, number of inmates in drug treatment or classrooms - really tells us whether Maryland is achieving the results it ultimately wants. Are the inmates leaving prison better educated, less addicted and therefore less likely to endanger their communities and return to jail?

Ultimately, that's not what StateStat measures, nor was it apparently intended to do that. In earlier years, the state tried to achieve this with a program (still in place) called "Managing for Results," but it still doesn't implement that program very well, according to audits.

It's good to hear that the O'Malley administration, through its top staff, is taking the day-to-day management of state government seriously. But it would better if we didn't have to take their word for it - if the evidence for this constant attention on improvement were visible right on the Web site, for all to see.