

## Note from the Editor

During the past two decades, local government has started to undergo a dramatic change in its relationship to the public. Many city officials, both elected and appointed, have moved away from the old model of government by expert and mandate to explore the less familiar terrain of active partnerships and two-way civic conversation. One of the most substantive changes is in the area of local government performance measurement and reporting, the exclusive focus of this special issue of the *National Civic Review*.

“Over the past thirteen years, much has been learned, tried, and set into motion,” writes guest editor Barbara J. Cohn Berman, a vice president of the Fund for the City of New York (FCNY), in her introduction to the issue. “Although not yet the norm, a movement and increased willingness on the part of governments to consider new ways to listen to and communicate with the public seem to be afoot, along with new interest from nonprofit organizations to engage in performance measurement and reporting about local government activities.”

As a former deputy rent commissioner and deputy personnel director for the City of New York, later a private management consultant, and now the founding director of FCNY’s Center on Government Performance, Berman witnessed this evolution from a number of vantage points. Working with public employees, she began to perceive a disconnect between how they viewed their performance and the perceptions of everyday citizens.

With support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, FCNY organized a series of focus groups to see if her suspicion was true. Eventually, the findings were published in her book *Listening to the Public: Adding the Voices of the People to Government Performance Measurement and Reporting*. Based on years of focus groups with people from numerous neighborhoods, income levels, ethnicities, and generations, the book delves into the citizen perspective on performance in twenty-one service areas.

Take the challenge of homelessness, for example. Most citizens judged the question of how well the city was dealing with this difficult challenge by how many homeless people they

saw on the street. Seems obvious enough, but city officials were surprised. They didn’t have much control over how many people slept on the street, so they judged their own work by how well they were monitoring conditions in homeless shelters—which most members of the public never saw.

The importance to citizens of the appearance of city streets was another revelation. She found that local transportation officials were surprised at how much people cared. This discovery led the Center on Government Performance to develop ComNET, an innovative tool that enables citizens to use handheld computers (PDAs) with digital cameras in surveying the conditions of their neighborhoods and report problems to the city departments or others responsible for fixing them.

The ComNET program, which has been used in more than eighty neighborhoods in seven cities, seems a practical way of bridging the perception gap between citizens and government. In her contribution to this issue, Roberta Schaefer, executive director of the Worcester (Massachusetts) Regional Research Bureau, describes how ComNET has worked in her city. Other articles in this issue describe methods for engaging citizens in government performance measurement and reporting at the local level. We hope the sum of these articles will serve as a valuable resource for our readership of civic activists, local government officials, academics, and nonprofit groups.

This special issue was made possible with the support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, a pioneering force in the field of performance measurement and reporting. We would like to thank the foundation and its program director Ted Greenwood, who contributed valuable guidance—and two articles—to this special issue.

Michael McGrath  
Editor

Editor’s note: In the article “Twenty Years of Community Service,” published in *National Civic Review*, Volume 96, Issue 4, the name of former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm was misspelled. I deeply regret the error.