



## **FERGUSON, BALTIMORE, AND THE SEARCH FOR CIVIC HEALTH METRICS**

ADDRESSING THE LINGERING PROBLEMS

By Randall Reid

Some changes in communities are cyclical, reassuring, and natural. Each February, flocks of Sandhill cranes leave their winter gathering at Payne's Prairie in Gainesville, Florida, migrating northward. Flying in broad circular patterns as they gather members, they fly over the neighborhood where I reside with their prehistoric calls that make neighbors come out of their homes to witness this harbinger of spring.

It is a Florida forecasting indicator, thousands of years old prompting me to text my northern friends that spring is coming. My text alert is a predictive analysis given with a high confidence level based upon visual data and sensory observations that I can see and my friends cannot due to geography.

Some events in community life serve as harbingers of change, predictively signaling significant future challenges for communities. The recent deaths of residents and random shooting of police officers, related civil unrest, and policing controversies in Ferguson, Baltimore, North Charleston, and New

York reflect disruptive and disturbing events that could occur in communities across the country.

Local government administrators are concerned with the state of our civil society as public employees, and our elected officials confront the demons of racism, economic disparity, concentrated unemployment, alienation, and unequal access to quality education in many urban places. These factors may be smoldering or lay dormant in your community and unseen due to the economic and racial segregation that underlies the residential neighborhoods of many communities.

Residents, homeland security pundits, religious leaders, and academics alike gather in community forums seeking to strengthen the fabric of their communities and reconcile their conflicting views of community security. One indication of civil society in crisis is young Americans raised in urban areas—with all the personal and religious freedom this country bestows—who feel so alienated as to suddenly choose to flee to regimes in the Middle East that reflect none of these values and who threaten to return to oppose our way of life.

A diagnosis of what contributes to achieving civic wellness, how to include more people in the American dream, and how to encourage a connection and belonging to one's community is vital now in communities. These human-oriented civic health and social equity metrics need to be a higher priority for public administrators.

### **Community Civic Health Is Essential**

Civic health is a popular topic today. Civic health metrics broadly imply the measurement of community well-being or the degree of well-being that is being achieved.

Civic health is not always associated with prosperity or well-functioning communities. Civic health and well-being can often be best seen in times of community misfortune and tragedy. The response of the residents of Charleston, South Carolina, to the church shootings demonstrates that

some communities can be models of civic health and social cohesion that allows resiliency during such periods of immense community stress.

Advocates of civic health suggest encouraging job creation, early childhood education, voter participation, parental involvement, civic engagement, crime and disease prevention, and higher levels of community connectivity as building blocks of stronger communities.

The data to understand and analyze our communities and residents is available in community surveys, economic reports, employment statistics, civic event attendance, and arrest records. There may be amazing potential correlations between the improved civic health metrics and the outcomes related to lowering crime, suicide, incarceration, poverty, and family dysfunction—those conditions that weaken the social fabric of communities and diminish the lives of residents.

It is not a small task to measure the well-being of a diverse community, but that may be a critical function for managers in the community of the future if current trends of polarization and economic disparity continue.

As a Floridian, I take great pride in our state, but due to comparative performance reviews of key performance indicators among all states, I know my state lags behind the majority of states in several key indicators of civic health. Being ahead of only Mississippi in some national indicators out of 50 states does not give one bragging rights.

That is the value of a national comparative database, which lies at the heart of the mission of the ICMA Center for Performance Analytics. Comparative data sobers you to the fact that while you may have extraordinary performance in some metrics, you are a laggard in others.

Yet with this kind of information, you can make decisions with the resources you have and the data you know. You can create a strategy to improve upon the deficits, using best practices you glean from comparisons among your peers.

## **TAKEAWAYS**

- › Local government leaders can learn to strategically balance and use a suite of performance management metrics, including civic health, to create more sustainable and resilient communities. Nowhere is that more true than in law enforcement.
- › Economic development strategies should include improving civic health and community well-being metrics, which are fundamental to the quality of life that attracts corporations and job seekers to specific locales.
- › Positive civic health and great community cohesion among residents can be fostered by better urban design, social media platforms, and traditional community events.

## A Florida Approach to Civic Health Metrics

In August 2014, former Governor of Florida and U.S. Senator Bob Graham and I discussed this topic in earnest in my capacity as a practitioner in residence at the University of Florida. Our conversation revolved around my current role at ICMA as director of performance initiatives and his concern for Florida and the state's lagging civic health metrics.

The Bob Graham Center for Public Service teaches citizenship and civic participation to young digital and social-media-conscious students bound for future public service. Graham expressed his interest in how performance metrics of civic health might be developed to see how Florida's diverse localities compare on measures of civic health, well-being, and social connectedness.

A need existed, beyond antidotal stories, to identify which Florida communities excel at the practices of community building and civic renewal. Comparative analytics might then identify what best practices others could adapt to their own communities to encourage greater levels of civic health or community well-being.

As a result of that conversation, the Joint Center for Public Service, the Florida City and County Management Association, the Florida League of Cities, and other partners are developing a pilot initiative in civic health metrics in Florida. This pilot program implemented through the Florida Benchmarking Consortium arose from a strategy paper titled "Florida Civitas" that was prepared by the ICMA performance analytics staff at the request of Graham.

The paper identified foundational documents on civic health, identified funding and data partners, and outlined the process and preparation of appropriate measures for civic health.

A pilot group of 15 council-manager communities was identified for potential participation as a consortium for civic metrics in a three-year pilot program. Selection of pilot communities was based on such criteria as participation in the annual League of Cities Citi Stat project and a 40-

## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND ANALYTICS-ASSISTED DECISION MAKING ARE ESSENTIAL TO ADDRESSING THE LINGERING AND COMPLEX PROBLEMS CONTINUALLY PLAGUING THE NEIGHBORHOODS AND RESIDENTS LEFT BEHIND.

year review of past winners and finalists of Florida's All America City Awards.

A panel then ranked numerous communities based upon knowledge of their political and governance stability, depth of staff capacity, and past civic program innovation. The final list of invited pilot communities represented the geographically and demographically diverse local governments within the state.

Peter Levine of Tufts University assembled initial Florida civic health metrics from research gathered from the Boston Indicators Project, The Tamarack Institute's "Approaches to Measuring More Community Engagement," and the Florida League of Cities reports of a number of public forums on community issues.

Florida's metrics may include:

- Volunteer hours, as reported to volunteering umbrella groups.
- Demographic representativeness of local elected leaders and business owners.
- Small business loans by race and gender.
- Voter turnout in local elections, from state voting files.
- Reported hate crimes per capita.
- Residential and school segregation by race and ethnicity.
- Rates of emigration, from realtor statistics.
- Library books in circulation per capita.
- Newspaper subscription rates.
- Number of nonprofit organizations per capita, nonprofit budgets per capita, and density of certain categories of nonprofits from the Center for Chartable Statistics.
- Home broadband Internet access rates.
- Total value of private grants per capita.
- FTE positions in municipal government that are devoted to community outreach/engagement.

- Numbers of positions open to unpaid residents on official bodies (school, police, city, water district board) per capita.
- Number of positions for youth on official bodies.
- Service learning participation rates in public schools.
- Third grade reading levels.
- Seventh grade end-of-course civics scores.
- Jury service numbers per capita.
- Volunteer and service-learning hours from local higher education institutions.
- Reported membership rates of such key civil society institutions as unions, political parties, League of Women Voters, Rotary, NAACP, Urban League, and religious congregations.

The civic health pilot program in Florida will continue to be refined as all participating consortium communities begin data collection in the fall of 2015. ICMA's Center for Performance Analytics will serve in a consulting role and assist with distribution of this and other civic health metrics. Local governments and states are now considering civic health metrics and seeking analytical tools to monitor their civic health data along with those of traditional service delivery.

Santa Monica, California's well-being index (<http://wellbeingproject.square-space.com>) and Seattle, Washington's Civic Health Index (<http://www.seattlecityclub.org/initiatives/civic-health-index>) have developed their own metrics of civic well-being. These projects evolved from broader local initiatives that collected resilient and sustainable community indicators, which like the metrics from Florida may in part be transferrable upon review to other jurisdictions.

## Performance Management Improves Civic Outcomes

Typically when one speaks of performance management, it is referred to as a business practice with technical measures of the inputs and outputs of service delivery, with rigorous adherence to processes and an organization culture that values data-driven decision making. Practitioners focus immediately on how analytics platforms, like ICMA Insights, work and on the costs, most significantly the management capital expended to implement the practice enterprise-wide.

Performance management is viewed as a task, instead of a professional practice or a necessary or advisable management discipline. We often ignore the question of why performance, like leadership or ethics, matters to the governance of communities.

The answer is an empowering source of motivation to do performance management. The answer lies in linking the practice of performance management to the higher purpose of improving lives in our community or to civic improvement, even to preserving democratic government.

If we lose focus on why we seek service level outcomes and if we ignore civic health impacts, when a crisis erupts, some residents eventually take to the streets to demand higher performance from the local governments where they live.

ICMA promotes performance management because the more effective that governments become, the better managers can improve the lives of residents and exercise proper stewardship of communities. Where civic health is lacking or in decline in a democratic society, managers might place the sustainability of their communities and their positions at risk.

## Civic Health Indicators Reflect Improved Lives

The migrating Sandhill cranes circling over my home are indicators each year of our environmental health. The species were at one time seriously threatened with extinction in the United

## How does your state compare with these baseline Florida state indicators?

### Voter Turnout in 2012

(Voting Eligible Population):  
60.8%; Nation: 61.8%;  
Florida ranking: 36th

### Voter Registration in 2012:

68.3%; Nation: 71.2%;  
Florida ranking: 40th

### Contacted or Visited a

**Public Official:** 10.3%;  
Nation: 12.3%;  
Florida ranking: 45th

### Belonged to a Community

**Group:** 33.6%; Nation: 39.2%;  
Florida ranking: 47th

### Volunteered:

21.1%;  
Nation: 26.5%;  
Florida ranking: 46th

### Attended Public Meeting:

7.1%; Nation: 9.0%;  
Florida ranking: 47th

### Donated Money to a Charity:

45.7%; Nation: 51.8%;  
Florida ranking: 48th

### Worked with Neighbors to

### Fix a Community Problem:

6.4%; Nation: 8.4%;  
Florida ranking: 50th

Source: Florida Joint Center for Citizenships.

States, but there was a concentrated effort on the preservation of the species and learning how to protect them. Recent annual bird counts document their viability and increasing population as metrics of their success.

Today, people speak of communities with similar concerns about their sustainability in the face of civic challenges like we have seen in Ferguson and Baltimore. Recent events like those that unfolded in the aftermath of church shootings in Charleston, however, show us how strong civic health and community cohesion can help communities withstand unspeakable

hardships and they can give clues to the metrics of civic hope.

One of the more powerful phrases of the ICMA 2008 strategic plan is the vision statement: "We are the premier association of professional local government leaders building sustainable communities to improve lives world-wide." Managers increasingly focus on community building, place making, and civic engagement to foster resiliency, sustainability, and civic renewal.

The metrics of civic health and well-being along with the application of sustainable ethics for all residents living in communities are essential to these professional activities.

Performance management and analytics are about the use of data to make better decisions. Obviously if better civic health outcomes are what communities seek, then performance management adherents argue that key civic health metrics need to be used to correlate with other metrics driving service delivery.

Performance measurement is necessary to monitor service delivery effectiveness in either community-based or traditional policing methodologies. They may also signal declines or increases in community well-being and guide resource allocation to preventative versus reactive programs benefitting citizens or neighborhoods.

Performance management and analytics-assisted decision making are essential to addressing the lingering problems continually plaguing the neighborhoods and residents left behind. It is really quite simple: better performance on the part of government improves the lives of residents and their satisfaction with government.

If we as a management profession cannot motivate ourselves to demonstrate that reality, we put the profession, the trust of residents, and communities at great risk. **PM**



**RANDALL REID** is ICMA Southeast regional director and director of performance initiatives, ICMA, Washington, D.C. (rreid@icma.org).