



The Berkshire Advisors Approach To...

## **CONDUCTING COMMUNITY SURVEYS**

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### **Approaching Surveys From A Management Perspective**

Berkshire Advisors conducts community surveys from a management perspective. Our primary focus when conducting such surveys is to ensure survey findings can be used to improve the level and quality of services citizens receive. In addition, where sufficient resources are available to do so we take an iterative approach to conducting community surveys with each succeeding survey focusing on an increasingly narrow set of issues.

### **Making Choices About What Items To Include On Survey Instruments**

The development of survey instruments is all about making choices. Regardless of the project scope, there are always more items one wants to include in the survey instrument than one can accommodate. Balancing the desire for information with the willingness of citizens to complete a long survey is always a challenge. Consequently, it is imperative that each and every survey question provides significant value to the government. For this reason, we refrain from including general questions about citizen satisfaction with the overall City services provided by a given department in the survey instrument. While it may be interesting to know how citizens compare police, fire, and public works services, for example, the resulting survey findings will not be actionable. Presumably, the government will continue to provide these core services regardless of the

survey findings. Instead, as we develop the survey instrument the foremost question in our minds is how can the government use the results to inform its decision making and/or to improve services.

### **Using Survey Results To Set Improvement Priorities To Allocate Resources**

The survey instrument should be structured to facilitate setting priorities and to inform decisions about how resources should be allocated. Our experience suggests that while citizens place a high value on most local government services, they do value some services more than others. In addition, they are more satisfied with some services than with others. When government managers compare survey results on the importance of various government services to survey results on service satisfaction, they can create a powerful tool for making resource allocation decisions. The resulting satisfaction/importance matrices can be used as a basis for reallocating resources from services that citizens rank low in importance to those they rank higher in importance. In addition, such survey results can be used to set improvement priorities — a manager should focus particular attention on services that get high marks for importance but low marks for satisfaction.

If the survey instruments focus on individual services provided by each Department (e.g. recreation programs, residential refuse collection, police

patrol response to calls), survey results can be compared across departments. (Such comparisons can be helpful in informing decisions about how scarce resources should be allocated among organizational units.) It is also important, however, to develop satisfaction/importance matrices for the services provided by individual departments so department managers can use the results to set improvement priorities for their own departments.

### **Using Survey Results To Determine How Services Should Be Provided**

While understanding whether citizens are satisfied or dissatisfied with selected services is important, improving satisfaction requires an understanding of what dimensions of service (e.g., responsiveness, accessibility, and reliability) are valued most by citizens. If for example, accessibility is the primary driver of citizen satisfaction for a service while reliability is not highly correlated with satisfaction, managers might reallocate resources from quality control to increasing the number of locations from which a service is provided. Consequently to be most useful to managers and decision makers survey results should provide information on the factors that drive satisfaction with various services.

### **Using Survey Results To Assess Service Levels**

Citizen surveys can be extremely useful in assessing the level of service governments should provide. While the cost of doing so for all government services would be high, assessing service levels for core government services that are highly visible is extremely worthwhile. For example, assessing expectations for the speed with which citizen-initiated calls for services should be responded to by police patrol officers can be extremely

helpful in determining how best to deploy and schedule patrol staff. In addition, survey results can be used to assess the likely reduction (or increase) in citizen satisfaction that would result from changing service levels. For example, for cities that collect residential refuse twice a week, a survey can be used to determine how valuable the second collection is to residents and to assess the consequences of reducing the frequency with which refuse is collected.

### **Determining For What Services Citizens Would Be Willing To Pay More And Who Should Pay These Increased Costs**

In general, citizens want both improved services and lower taxes/user fees. (One does not need to perform a citizen survey to reach this conclusion.) Where survey results are useful is in determining for what services citizens would be willing to pay more to receive a higher level of service. In addition, survey results can be used to inform decisions about who should bear the cost of improving services. For example, some citizens might favor a user fee to fund high quality recreation programs that children can participate in after school and during the summers while others might value these services so highly that they feel these services should be supported by the city's general fund. Survey results can be extremely useful in helping to determine how such service improvements should be funded and who should pay for them

### **ITERATIVE APPROACH**

Our experience conducting citizen surveys for local governments suggests that often survey results raise more questions than they address. As previously noted, while it is helpful to managers and decision-makers to know with what services citizens are satisfied

and dissatisfied, knowing why they are satisfied and dissatisfied is even more important. However, the cost of identifying and evaluating the primary drivers of satisfaction for each of the myriad services provided a local government would be prohibitive. Consequently, we suggest that when

resources permit the results of an initial citizen survey should be used to determine what survey items should be included on subsequent follow-up surveys. In developing these follow-up surveys we work to ensure the most important areas for follow-up are addressed.