October, 2008

The Research Bureau

Frequently-Asked Questions Regarding Participation in the New England States Performance Measurement Project

1. **Selection of Communities:** Any community in New England is invited to participate in the initial three-year project period regardless of population, budget, or other demographics. Currently, the average population of participating communities is 20,000. Communities larger or smaller are welcome to join.

2. **Will we all share as communities with other communities?** Collaborative decision making and information sharing among participating communities is essential to the success of this project. The project structure (a Steering Committee and Service Area Committees) is intended to allow for and promote a highly collaborative process by which communities work together to determine the service areas for which performance will be measured as well as the specific aspects/how that performance will be measured (i.e., develop the measures). Once data are collected, the findings, as well as operational/management practices and lessons learned or success stories will be shared and discussed at both the Service Area and Steering Committee level to help communities learn from each other and identify potential opportunities to improve service delivery. The role of The Research Bureau as the Project Coordinator is to facilitate this process and to offer suggestions and observations; however, the participants ultimately determine both the service areas and performance measures to be included in the project.

   The Steering Committee, composed of each participating community's CEO, will be the project's policy-making body, and this group will be responsible for selecting the service areas in which performance will be measured. Steering Committee meetings will be facilitated by the Project Coordinator, who may suggest areas to measure based on knowledge of the services provided in each of the participating communities and the citizen input gathered. Once the service areas are selected, separate service area committees will be formed to select performance measures. The CEO serving on the Steering Committee will be asked to appoint members to the Service Area Committees who have management responsibility for the specific area, and these individuals will be the point-person for the collection and submission of data at the local level.

Part of The Research Bureau's role in coordinating the project will be to develop meeting agendas, and to provide meeting minutes and summaries of discussions, and facilitate information-sharing at all levels and phases of the project. A project list-serv and/or intranet will be utilized to ensure that information is readily available to participants. The Project Coordinator will convene the committee meetings, but will also regularly check-in with the individuals serving on these committees and be available to assist with any questions at the local level. In managing the project, The Research Bureau is committed to keeping clear and open lines of communication to encourage cooperation and participation.

3. **Survey Questions:** The Research Bureau has extensive experience developing and conducting citizen surveys. The intention is to build on existing citizen surveys and develop a core set of questions (related to the service areas being measured) that each participating community will agree to administer to its citizens. The Research Bureau is willing to work with communities that may wish to add questions to expand the scope of the survey. We expect that the "core" questions will include a number of demographic questions as it is important to understand the characteristics of respondents.

4. **Who owns the product?** The "products" of this project and the associated tools developed (e.g., data collection templates, citizen surveys, focus-group protocols, etc), will be shared with the project participants who may wish to use or adapt them for future use, and are free to share or distribute them as they wish. The intent of the project is to promote and expand the adoption of performance measurement and management practices at the local level, and to this end, we encourage participants to apply these tools and processes to services provided that are outside the scope of this project.

In each of the three project years, The Research Bureau will prepare a comprehensive report that will describe and analyze the performance data of each participant. The reports will be prepared and released publicly in electronic format only after review by the Service Area and Project Steering Committees (individual municipalities are free to publicly share their own data with residents or others at any time they wish). The Research Bureau will also provide each participating municipality with electronic copies of data summaries and related charts and tables for local officials to use in presentations, grant applications, and budget reports, etc.

The Research Bureau will use existing templates as a starting point for developing a number of tools, e.g., the North Carolina Benchmarking Project staff shared copies of their data collection tools with us, and to the extent that we can adapt these to the measures that we will use in this project, we will do so. We also intend to present the Steering Committee with several design/lay out formats for the annual data report, based on formats that we have found to work well in terms of balancing visual impact with and easy-to-understand format, and will ask the Committee to approve the final report design.

5. **Defining Goals:** Establishing goals in terms of desired performance levels will be the responsibility of individual jurisdictions. The performance measures (data collected) will serve as a tool to measure progress in achieving a goal.

6. **How are measures defined?** *See response to question two above regarding how service areas and measures will be chosen.* The measures selected will be those that local officials believe to be most crucial for making decisions about service delivery. The Research Bureau will assist the Service Area Committees in their selection of performance measures. We expect to select six to eight measures per service area (including workload, efficiency, and effectiveness measures), limiting the number primarily due to the necessity to keep data collection and cleaning at a manageable level. Other criteria that will guide the selection of measures include the following: 1) validity – *the measure will accurately reflects the event(s) it purports to measure,* 2) relevance- *the measure will pertain to an essential and meaningful aspect of service performance,* 3) accuracy- *the data will be materially accurate and prior to collection all participants will use the same definition and understand the information required for each measure reported,* 4) reliability – *data will be uniformly collected allowing for comparison of results from one year to another as well as across participating jurisdictions,* and 5) availability- *the data collected will be readily available and collectible.*

7. **Timeline:**

Project Year One (Calendar Year 2008)

- Hold project kick-off meeting with Steering Committee (CEOs)
- Each jurisdiction will obtain citizen input to guide the selection of service areas
- Steering Committee meets to select service areas and establish Service Area Committees (two service areas will be measured in year one)
- Service Area Committees identify performance measures and work with Project Coordinator to develop process/definitions and a data collection tool.
- Municipalities will collect and submit performance and cost data for Fire and Rescue service. The data will be cleaned and analyzed by The Research Bureau, and reports (prepared by The Research Bureau and reviewed by the project participants) will be publicly released. Data collection process for second service area will be prepared.

Project Year Two:

- A third service area will be developed during year two, with data collection and reporting occurring for first two service areas.
- The second citizen input component, Citizen Involvement in Setting Performance Targets, will be implemented.

Project Year Three:

- Data collection and benchmarking for three service areas will occur;
- Each municipality will administer a citizen satisfaction survey; and
- The Steering Committee may identify a fourth service area to be added in project year four.

8. **Time Commitments required of the Town Manager and Department Heads?** Each participating community's CEO will serve on the Project Steering Committee, and during Year 1, we anticipate holding three Steering Committee meetings. While the meeting location will be determined once all of the participating communities have been chosen, we are considering holding meetings (expected to run 3-4 hours in length) in Worcester given its central location in New England. The CEOs will be the project "point person" and serve as the liaison between the municipality and the Project Coordinator. The CEO, or his or her designee, will also be the lead on the citizen-input components. The members of the Service Area Committees will meet formally up to four times in project year one, and these meetings are expected to run 3-4 hours in length. Service Area Committee representatives will also be the "data collection point person" and will designate or assist staff in the collection of data elements, as defined by the Committee. The Research Bureau recognizes that the work associated with participating in the Performance Measurement Project is in addition to the workload the CEOs and Department Heads already carry, and our commitment is to run the project as efficiently and effectively as possible so that it is not viewed as a burdensome time commitment by the participating communities.

9. **Who manages the overall project in your town?** This is ultimately up to the Town. The project proposal states that the CEOs of the participating municipalities will serve on the Steering Committee. We will ask the CEO to designate a "point person" with whom The Research Bureau will be in regular contact.

10. **Who manages the multi-community involvement?** The New England States Government Finance Officers Association has received a grant from the Sloan Foundation for this project. The NESGFOA will contract with The Research Bureau (based in Worcester, MA), and staff at The Research Bureau will be responsible for coordinating and implementing all aspects of the project.

11. **How does the New England States project differ from ICMA's benchmarking project?**

    (1) ICMA project is international in scope. ICMA assumes that all cities/towns are comparable, no matter whether you are in New England or in Texas. You use universal templates to gather data. And a report is generated automatically. The NESPMP pays more attention to local diversity. The NESPMP just compares the towns in the six New England states.
    (2) The NESPMP offers more face-to-face and individual training and assistance in the project. ICMA charges additional fees for on-site training and other assistance.
    (3) The NESPMP integrates citizen participation throughout the project with a citizen survey in year three. ICMA charges separately for a citizen survey. There is no other citizen participation in the ICMA projects.
    (4) ICMA provides a head-to-head data report which may embarrass local government officials. The NESPMP plans a different report design.

12. **How does the Steering Committee make decisions?** It will be difficult to reach unanimous agreement in defining services, setting up accounting standards, etc. The Steering Committee should proceed through collaboration and consensus-building.

13. **If I (a member of the Steering Committee) cannot attend the meeting, how can I participate in decision-making?** The Steering Committee plays a leading role in the Project. The Research Bureau strongly requests the committee members attend meetings. In case of absence, the Steering Committee member should send a substitute who has authority to make decisions in his/her absence.

14. **Who is qualified to be a facilitator? Can a facilitator be a government official?** To avoid government and political impacts on citizen participation, a facilitator should be an independent individual, not a government official or someone who represents one constituency only, such as a union official. A facilitator should be a community or business leader, who has organizational ability, and would like to volunteer his/her time on the Project. The facilitator should work with town manager to put together a cross-section of town representatives to participate in the focus group.

15. **Does a facilitator need to attend the training session in Worcester, MA? If he/she cannot make it, can The Research Bureau still train that person?** Citizen Participation is one of the key factors in the Project and is required by the Sloan Foundation. Facilitators **must** attend the training, which will give them the tools to implement the citizen participation process.

16. **Are there any criteria to select citizen focus group? How can we ensure that the selected ones represent the whole community?** Each town must have 8 - 12 participants in focus group representing a broad range of interests – large and

small businesses, education, neighborhoods, community– based organizations, professions, non-profit sector. There should be no government officials in the group, either elected or appointed.

17. **What is the cost to a community for participating in the Project?** Each community needs to contribute $5,200 per year.