

O'Malley pushes CitiStat model in speech at liberal think tank

Government efficiency said to thrive under results-driven system

By Andrew A. Green
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WASHINGTON -- Measuring the effectiveness of government is the key for progressives to earn the trust of voters and beat out small-government conservatives, Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley said at a liberal think tank yesterday.

Speaking at a seminar on performance-driven government management, O'Malley preached the virtues of CitiStat, the high-tech system he employed as Baltimore mayor to measure everything from pothole repair to violent crime, and its infant cousin, StateStat. He gave the keynote address at the seminar, held at the Center for American Progress.

As O'Malley sees it, the idea is about more than tamping down absenteeism in the public works department or even saving taxpayer money. He says it's about restoring faith in government at a time when failures in Iraq and in responding to Hurricane Katrina have bred cynicism and mistrust.

"We see a lot of contempt about government on the American right," O'Malley said. "Their desire is to make it so small you could drown it in the bathtub. ... But when we're facing these huge government challenges, they fail. They fail spectacularly."

John Podesta, former White House chief of staff in the Clinton administration who runs the Center for American Progress, said he wants to see CitiStat-like accountability measures brought to the federal government. The center released a paper yesterday called "Governing by the Numbers: The Promise of Data-Driven Policymaking in the Information Age," which Podesta said was the product of years of discussion on the issue.

"Good government, meaning government that is open and evidence-based and dedicated to the common good, is one of the core goals here," Podesta said. "Governor O'Malley's example provides an excellent model as we seek to create a government that's efficient and responsive."

O'Malley said the keys to CitiStat's effectiveness were the dedication of top officials in the government to following up on problems identified in meetings, where managers and department heads were grilled every two weeks about performance measures.

It was also about shifting the focus to the results government produces rather than the amount of money it spends on its goals.

"We always want to know how much we are spending on pre-K education," O'Malley said. "Less often do we ask how many more kids are enrolled in pre-K."

When he brought the management system to city government in 2000 - an idea he said he stole from the New York Police Department's crime-mapping techniques - he faced a bureaucracy rife with waste and disillusionment, O'Malley said.

When he first started asking basic questions about performance of city government, O'Malley said, "city managers would look back at me as if I were asking them to explain the laws of quantum physics. They were managing by feel, not by data. ... Perhaps they had stopped collecting data because it was so depressing."

Most of O'Malley's talk yesterday was focused on the lessons and successes of CitiStat, not StateStat, which has only been in existence for a few months. He highlighted as an early success of StateStat the decision to close the antiquated and dangerous Maryland House of Correction at Jessup.