

Citizen Perspectives on Performance Audits
Focus Groups
March 2006

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the results of three focus groups conducted on behalf of the Washington State Auditor's Office. The purpose was to explore citizens' ideas on how to accomplish the performance audits of public agencies mandated by the passage of Initiative 900.

The groups were:

- Two South King County groups held the evening of March 9 in Burien. One group included people who had voted "yes" on Initiative 900; participants in the other group had voted "no" or did not recall.
- One group in Spokane held the evening of March 13. This was a mix of I-900 "yes" and "no" voters.

Participants were recruited from a list of registered voters and were paid a stipend for their participation. The groups were balanced for age and gender; they excluded current public sector employees and people working in the media. The groups were moderated by Stuart Elway, of Elway Research.

ATTITUDES TOWARD STATE GOVERNMENT

In a short survey filled out prior to the discussion, rated state government programs for their 1) efficiency; 2) effectiveness; and 3) accountability. Most participants rating were in the mid-range of the scale (neither very high nor very low). These items were then discussed at length:

- Accountability was the most significant issue. In almost all cases, the accountability scores were lower than effectiveness or efficiency. Participants pointed to a perceived lack of repercussion for state employees who do not perform their jobs well, and a need for information on spending.
- The highest ratings overall went to environment/natural resources. The high marks were related to appreciation of recycling programs, the general environment attitudes of the population, and the state's natural beauty.
- Higher education was also rated relatively highly in effectiveness, and above average in efficiency and accountability.
- The lowest scores went to transportation, tied to frustration over traffic and delays in installing mass transit. Transportation received by far the most "zeros;" five people found the state transportation program not effective; five said "not efficient," and three "not accountable."

The I-900 opponents and the Spokane group were more distrustful of government than the I-900 supporters. They suspected governments of being dishonest, with immune employees, and complained often about continued requests for more taxes and unclear or unknown spending. Spokane residents spoke of feeling that the “west side of the mountains” is favored over the east in terms of state spending.

Despite differences in tone, some themes were consistent in all groups:

- It is difficult to separate the concepts of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness when talking about government.
- For many, “efficiency” meant timeliness. They want decisions and projects to move more quickly.
- In terms of efficiency, however, wasted money was the larger issue, with the monorail project an oft-mentioned example.
- Participants did not want the government to be so efficient that it becomes inhumane or unsafe, however.

PERFORMANCE AUDITS

Participants had two main reactions to the imminent performance audits:

1. Hopefulness that the performance audits will make some difference.
2. Concern that the audits will be just one more layer of bureaucracy.

Some concerns and conditions were universal across the groups:

- The auditors need to be qualified (familiar with the field being audited) and honest, with no advance notice given to auditees.
- They want demonstrable results. That there is no authority to enforce change after the audit is troubling.

Prioritizing the Performance Audits

Participants suggested several different ways to prioritize the audits. These included: by size of budget, number of people affected and “where we think is the most waste.” Programs most often mentioned as priorities were:

- K-12 education because “it’s the foundation.”
- Transportation, because of the number of people impacted and the visibility of the problems (traffic jams, failure of the monorail, etc.)
- Health and social services, largely because of the potential damage done to children who are not well served by the system.

Audit Criteria

Participants were concerned that there be clear criteria for each audit, although it was difficult to get agreement on appropriate criteria. Education was the easiest program for which to suggest such measures, with some being: graduation rates, pass/fail rates, WASL and other test scores, class size, number of cut backs (music, free sports, other electives), and staying within budgets.

Transportation criteria also included outcomes (count people on buses at different times of the day) and inputs (money being spent on bike paths versus roads.) Human and social services seemed the most difficult area to quantify.

Reporting of Results

It was universally held that the audit results should be available to the public; in a form that is concise and clear yet enables the reader to continue further for more detail. The report should include the goals and objectives, and be in “layman’s language.”

The Internet was often cited as a useful channel. Other distribution methods suggested included the newspapers (at least to alert the public that the audit was done and where to find a copy); television reports, posted in the public areas of the audited agencies; and sent out by legislators in their newsletters.

DISCUSSION

These discussions indicate that the Washington State performance audits face many challenges:

- There is significant distrust of all branches of government.
- It is difficult to get agreement on measures for the effectiveness, efficiency and/or accountability of government programs.
- Performing the audits will be a complex challenge.
- Citizens want a thorough, meaningful job done on the audits, yet they are sensitive to government processes taking “too long,” and do not want the audits to cost much extra.

Participants in these focus groups were surprised that Washington was the only state to be undertaking performance audits on this scale. They were generally hopeful that the audits can make a difference in the way state and local government operates, yet tempered in their expectations for the audits.

