



*A Citizens' Assessment of the Effectiveness
of St. Louis City Government*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

September 9, 1997

FOCUS ST. LOUIS



INTRODUCTION

In April, 1997, St. Louis voters elected a new mayor, Clarence Harmon, who campaigned on a platform of government reform. One of Mayor Harmon's first steps after assuming office was to ask FOCUS St. Louis, the region's citizens league and premier leadership development organization, to conduct an assessment of the executive functions which report to the Mayor and to make recommendations for change within the existing system on ways to promote more effective and responsive government service.

FOCUS St. Louis conducted this assessment with the objective of promoting effective, responsive, and accessible government services. A broad-based, diverse committee of approximately 60 citizen leaders completed the study within a 100-day time frame. The citizen volunteers spent over 1,200 hours on this project. There was no fee charged to the city to perform this assessment.

The FOCUS St. Louis assessment process was designed to reflect the realities of city government structure, while ensuring that those most responsible for service delivery—city government employees—had an opportunity to be heard. St. Louis has a "weak-mayor" system, which divides the executive functions of city government among ten elected officials. The Mayor controls the largest portion of the bureaucracy (23 of 31 areas), and this study included only those functions which report directly to the Mayor. These areas account for approximately 50 percent of the city's FY98 general revenue expenditure. The methodology used for the assessment allowed city government employees to voice their successes, frustrations, and recommendations for change. The importance of listening to and learning from the experiences and suggestions of employees is a major first step toward improving government effectiveness. Employees are the first point of contact with all constituents.

FOCUS St. Louis believes that effective city government is of regional concern because a well-run center city is vital to the success of the entire region—urban, suburban, and rural. Receiving public feedback is a critical part of successful government and this assessment was truly a regional effort. Although committee members came primarily from the city of St. Louis, the committee also included citizens from throughout the bi-state metropolitan area. Regardless of city or regional residency, each committee member believed that the whole region is a stakeholder in center city government. Mayor Harmon recognized the importance of taking a regional approach to this project. The Mayor chose FOCUS St. Louis to assess city government because of the organization's regional perspective, as well as its ability to respond quickly and involve a broad-based, diverse group of highly qualified volunteers.

The resulting final report provides a frank overview of the current state of city government, based primarily on the input and experiences of those who work within it. The study is not a critique of management style or of individual personnel. Rather, it presents broad themes that were found across government departments. It also identifies major conclusions in specific departments, and provides the Mayor with significant recommendations toward improvement. This Executive Summary presents only the broad themes.

FOCUS St. Louis has found that government in St. Louis can readily become more effective, provided it embraces changes in a number of areas. FOCUS St. Louis is committed to working with the Mayor on the implementation of this report, and we call on all citizens, organizations, community leaders, and elected officials to assist the Mayor in carrying out these recommendations. The status-quo is not acceptable for St. Louis, as a city and as a region. Efforts must be made to move the region forward. This FOCUS St. Louis study is one more step in that direction.

METHODOLOGY

The FOCUS St. Louis committee assembled to conduct the assessment of St. Louis city government was comprised of approximately 60 members, balanced according to race and gender. The majority of committee members were St. Louis city taxpayers. Every effort was made to ensure that this effort was inclusive and citizen-led, free from conflict of special interests and agendas.

For purposes of this study, St. Louis government was divided into twelve functions, with an assessment team assigned to each function. The twelve assessment teams were supported by six project consultants and six university interns (one consultant/intern pair for every two teams).

The assessment process began in mid-June when a detailed self assessment survey was sent out to city department and division heads. More than 70 self assessments were completed by these managers and were then returned to FOCUS St. Louis. The self-assessments were followed by more than 200 on-site interviews with city employees from across the organizational chart. These were conducted over a three-week period in mid-July. Confidentiality was assured, and was repeatedly stressed to staff, volunteers, and participants throughout the data collection and deliberation processes.

Key elected officials were also given an opportunity to be interviewed. Five Aldermen, the Aldermanic President, one former Aldermanic President, and one former Mayor responded to invitations to be interviewed. The three-week time limit for data collection was a barrier to full participation by everyone. Involvement by the current Mayor was limited to actions specifically requested by FOCUS St. Louis. Outside expertise was also sought, and a number of references were consulted regarding government best practices.

The 100-day deadline for completion of the report was selected by FOCUS St. Louis because the organization felt that the Mayor needed a baseline report in his hands early in his administration. Furthermore, FOCUS St. Louis felt that, despite the time constraint, it was possible to produce a very useful report which could, at a minimum, raise significant issues and recommendations for the Mayor's further consideration. While the short timeline automatically limited the depth of the study and the ability to verify all of the information received, the report is an excellent overview of city government's strengths and weaknesses based on the viewpoints of those on the front lines of service delivery—the employees. Hence, survey responses and interview statements were predominantly taken as presented by respondents.

Critical to improving government effectiveness is soliciting and understanding the experiences and suggestions of employees. This report reflects the earnest, forthcoming, and eager voices of city employees. The willingness of employees to improve government service delivery was made clear through their open, honest, and frank discussion with FOCUS St. Louis team members.

Major findings and recommendations are included in the final FOCUS St. Louis report. Additional findings and recommendations, based on participant-completed self-assessments and participant interviews, are included in a separate, supplemental document of supporting data. The committee's findings were divided into four categories: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The supporting document was submitted to the Mayor along with the report for his review and use. The recommendations vary as widely as the functions being assessed.

BROAD THEMES

The most common strength was found in the professionalism of the city government staff. On the whole, employees want to do their jobs well—sometimes in the face of great difficulties. The most common weakness, however, centered on human resource leadership and investment. While employees want to perform, their efforts are hindered by a lack of leadership that is demonstrated in an outdated personnel management system, ineffective communication and coordination, and insufficient technology and equipment. This creates a work environment with high levels of frustration and large pockets of poor morale.

Despite the city's financial and budgetary constraints, the following recommendations are made in all areas that are currently in critical need of change. It is imperative for the Mayor and the public to understand the breadth and depth of change necessary to improve city government. Armed with all recommendations made as the result of the FOCUS St. Louis assessment, the Mayor, budget officials, and department management can prioritize needs, determine incremental action steps, and allocate resources based on sound and well-informed decisions.

HUMAN RESOURCE ISSUES

FOCUS St. Louis found that the city's employees are generally committed to the city of St. Louis, to the public they serve, and to their jobs. It is therefore critical for employees to find satisfaction at work, in comfortable and appropriate working conditions, and to be fairly compensated for their work. A major philosophical shift in human resources management within city government is needed to correct personnel problems. Effectively managing and soundly investing in the city's human resources is a critical first step toward government reform.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Disseminate a consistent and personally-demonstrated message of effective government and continuous improvement from the Mayor.** Use the Mayor's office to model the level of quality, responsiveness, and high performance standards required of individual departments.
- **Clearly define departmental missions and responsibilities.** Use a collaborative, problem-solving approach to achieve this task by including department and division employees in the process.
- **Ensure that employees' work environments are conducive to productivity.** Productivity and effectiveness can be maximized when employees are provided with safe and comfortable work areas and properly working equipment and machinery.
- **Revisit job classifications and salary ranges.** Salaries should be carefully reviewed and aligned with job responsibilities.
- **Seek input and feedback in planning processes from employees and from the public being served.** Developing and implementing institutionalized mechanisms for employee and citizen input will improve internal morale and external perceptions, and will provide a steady supply of recommendations for change.

- **Enhance employee training programs.** New and existing employees need additional training and development opportunities, including programs in career growth, advancement, non-traditional training (such as conflict resolution and facilitation), and department-specific training.
- **Increase employee recruitment efforts.** Compile and maintain candidate eligibility lists. Establish linkages to area schools and appropriate institutions of higher education, including vocational and technical schools.
- **Reform the city's approach to human resource management.** Begin by immediately convening a task force to address the city's personnel procedures and practices and to develop implementation strategies for the above recommendations.

COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION ISSUES

FOCUS St. Louis found that communication and coordination throughout city government is generally poor and ineffective. Achieving truly effective government requires a high level of interaction between and within departments.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement an operational strategic plan for the city of St. Louis.** Establish long-term goals, objectives and incremental action steps through an inclusive planning process to guide the actions of city departments.
- **Streamline the permit and license acquisition processes for individuals and for businesses by implementing a one-stop shopping approach or an account management approach.** The procedures for attaining various permits and licenses are extremely bureaucratic and disjointed. Collaboration across city departments is critical to alleviating the inefficiencies of the current process.
- **Better utilize the city's internal cable television channel for training and information purposes.** Produce and make available general customer service and specific departmental training programs.
- **Establish regular meeting schedules between the Mayor and department heads and between the Mayor and division heads.** Meeting regularly will allow the Mayor to send a consistent message regarding his performance standards and to hold this level of leadership accountable.
- **Institutionalize a regular mechanism for enhanced communication among complementary departments.** It is critical that departments and divisions that perform complementary functions keep one another informed and updated in order to reduce duplication of efforts and effectively engage in cooperative planning and coordinated service delivery.
- **Upgrade communications equipment.** Install a voice mail telephone system and update computer hardware and software to allow departments to share databases, access the Internet and communicate by e-mail.

EQUIPMENT AND TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

Another great disadvantage facing the city of St. Louis is its inadequate equipment and outdated technology. The lack of equipment and technology can consume inordinate amounts of employees' time and resources and negatively affect their morale. It can limit employees' ability to deliver outstanding service.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Solicit a list of top-priority, critically needed equipment from every city government division and conduct an equipment audit.** Make the list a budgetary priority so that division employees will have the tools and equipment necessary to do their jobs effectively and efficiently.
- **Streamline equipment requisition procedures, and raise the \$200 limit on departmental purchases.** In general, the entire purchase/bidding process needs to be evaluated and revised with a view toward minimizing paperwork and the amount of time necessary for approval.
- **Purchase or lease the appropriate technology to provide the city with a comprehensive information management and networking system.** The benefits of a well-researched technological investment will greatly exceed the initial costs.
- **Actively promote public-private partnerships to encourage equipment and technology loans and/or donations.**
- **Provide Internet and e-mail access to the appropriate city employees.**
- **Develop computer networks among those departments that need to share databases.**

SERVING THE PUBLIC

The recommendations included in the previous sections affect the city's ability to effectively serve the public. It is critical, however, for the city to solicit public feedback on government services in order to determine public satisfaction levels. Public perception is a critical tool for government to utilize in working toward effective service delivery. Government should be asking: Why is this the perception? Is the perception different or similar to that of the service provider? What information needs to be relayed or what changes made in order to alter this public perception? The city should evaluate its actions in terms of how they affect the image of city government in the eyes of the public. The goal should not be simply delivering services, but also delivering satisfaction.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create and implement a Master Development Plan for the city of St. Louis.** Make St. Louis city development a governmental priority.

¹ Cohen, Barbara. Center on Municipal Government Performance, Report Number 1: "Listening to Citizens" 1996 (New York: Fund for the City of New York).

- **Market the city of St. Louis as an attractive place to live, work and visit; highlight its amenities and resources.** Planning, development, and skilled marketing are the city's best tools for revitalizing St. Louis and improving the quality of life on both a city-wide and a region-wide basis.
- **Encourage and develop public-private partnerships.** Through public-private partnerships, both business and government save money, demonstrate a model of collaboration, and contribute to the revitalization and economic development of the city.
- **Encourage collaboration among city government divisions and with other local government systems** (e.g., St. Louis County and East St. Louis). Proactively forming and developing partnerships among city government divisions and other government entities in the St. Louis metropolitan area is critical to improving the quality of life on a region-wide basis.
- **Develop an informational directory and further develop the city government web page to make government services easily accessible and understandable to the public.** Key information regarding government services, including department and division functions, important addresses, and phone numbers should be included.
- **Provide city government employees (existing and new) with ongoing training opportunities that are focused on effectively serving and interacting with the public.** All city employees need to deal with the public on an efficient and professional basis, handle citizen inquiries and complaints, and be responsive to requests for service.
- **Create regular opportunities for city employees, particularly front line workers, to provide management with substantive input and feedback.**
- **Institutionalize citizen input mechanisms and use feedback to increase responsiveness and improve effectiveness.** Promote the Citizens Service Bureau to the public, and enhance it to be the primary touchstone between the public and government.
- **Define achievable outcomes on the basis of public needs. Assess department and division performance on an annual basis.**
- **Build on existing efforts which support public service.** Examples include the work of the Citizen-Customer task force, which deserves to be continued. The "City Employee Code of Citizen Service," also deserves to be updated and redistributed.
- **Prominently display uniform placards stating the vision, mission, and values of the city in every city office. Each individual department and division office should also prominently display its specific vision, mission, and values.** Having the guiding principles of the city and individual departments prominently displayed encourages staff to uniformly practice them and illustrates that the city is a mission-driven, strategic organization.

NEXT STEPS

FOCUS St. Louis recommends that the Mayor take the following immediate action steps toward the implementation of this report:

- 1) Convene an intragovernmental task force, including several at-large members, to prioritize recommendations, determine feasibility, and develop an action plan. FOCUS St. Louis is available to facilitate this charge.
- 2) Authorize FOCUS St. Louis to perform a follow-up evaluation of government improvement in one year, and issue a progress report to the community. Accountability is critical to significant change.

CONCLUSION

The full report, *Inside City Hall*, including the supplemental document of supporting data, contains more than 120 pages of specific, department by department findings and recommendations throughout City Hall.

The FOCUS St. Louis assessment identified many examples of best practices in local government, but it also identified major challenges to overall effectiveness. While acknowledging the reality of the city's budgetary constraints, it is critical for the Mayor and the public to recognize the nature of the changes necessary to improve city government—particularly in the areas of human resources, cooperation and coordination within city government and with its constituents, equipment and technology, and serving the public. With all of the FOCUS St. Louis recommendations for improving the effectiveness of city government in hand, the Mayor can work collaboratively with other government officials to prioritize needs, determine action steps, and allocate resources based on sound, well-informed decisions.

FOCUS St. Louis calls on other city elected officials, whose cooperation is essential to the successful implementation of this report, to promote effective government by supporting and acting upon the recommendations in this report. This report should not only be embraced by the Mayor, but also by elected officials, city residents and business owners, and citizens of the St. Louis region. Other city governments might want to follow St. Louis' lead in undergoing government reform by starting with a citizen-led, independent assessment of effectiveness. The recommendations made in this report require community-wide support, as well as the support of the Mayor.

This report must not sit on the shelf. Its implementation is crucial to the future of the city of St. Louis and to the region as a whole. FOCUS St. Louis calls on all citizens, organizations, community leaders and elected officials in the city of St. Louis and the region as a whole to assist the Mayor in carrying out this report's recommendations. The city is at a critical crossroads. The opportunity for local revitalization and national prominence through government reform is NOW.

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| <p>CITY GOVERNMENT
DEPARTMENTS ASSESSED</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Airport Assessor's Office Board of Public Service Civil Rights Enforcement Agency City Counselor's Office City Emergency Management Agency City Marshal's Office Community Development Agency Health and Hospitals Human Services Mayor's Office Medical Examiner's Office Municipal Court Judges Municipal Court Clerk Parks Department Personnel Department Public Safety Public Utilities Register's Office St. Louis Development Corporation Soldier's Memorial Streets Department Supply Commissioner's Office |
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ABOUT FOCUS ST. LOUIS

FOCUS St. Louis is a nonprofit organization whose members share a vision and a commitment to work together to improve the St. Louis region as a place to live and work. The organization pursues a wide range of leadership development programs and community policy initiatives each year as part of its mission to strengthen the St. Louis region. It is committed to involving citizens, developing leadership, mobilizing diverse interests, addressing needs and opportunities, and acting regionally. Any individual, organization or company that has an interest in the welfare and progress of the greater St. Louis region may become a member of FOCUS St. Louis.

FOCUS St. Louis was created in July 1996 through the merger of two of the region's strongest and most influential nonprofit organizations—Confluence St. Louis and The Leadership Center of Greater St. Louis. These organizations shared a history of working to make the St. Louis region a better place for all people. Together they had over 30 years of experience in developing citizen leaders and dealing with community policy issues. After careful consideration of the region's needs and their own strengths, the leadership of Confluence and The Leadership Center determined that they could expand the reach and impact of their programs and activities by merging the two organizations.

FOCUS St. Louis is governed by a 30-member board of directors who establish policy for the organization. Board members are selected from the membership of the organization and serve on a volunteer basis without compensation.

For more information on any of our programs or activities, please call the FOCUS St. Louis office at 314/622-1250.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The board of directors and staff of FOCUS St. Louis wish to express their appreciation to the members of Civic Progress, Inc. who recognized the importance of this assessment project and generously provided the financial support to make it happen. Special thanks also to Deloitte & Touche L.L.P. for providing loaned executives to assist on a portion of the assessment. FOCUS St. Louis is especially grateful to Mayor Clarence Harmon for requesting that we conduct this study.

FOCUS St. Louis gratefully acknowledges the many volunteers, staff members, and city employees who made extraordinary efforts to complete the first phase of this project. Their willingness to get involved is proof that the citizens of the region care about their community and are prepared to promote and support real, positive change.

OUR VISION

FOCUS St. Louis will transform the St. Louis region by developing citizen leaders, stimulating citizen involvement, and mobilizing diverse interests to act regionally on critical issues.

OUR MISSION

FOCUS St. Louis will strengthen the St. Louis region by:

- Attracting and developing citizens for active involvement and leadership roles in regional decision making;
- Facilitating alliances to foster inclusive and collaborative action for the region;
- Developing solutions that produce visible change.

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