

MEMORANDUM

June 16, 2023

TO: Government Operations and Fiscal Policy (GO) Committee

FROM: Kaitlyn Simmons, Performance Management and Data Analyst
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Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO)

SUBJECT: **OLO Memorandum Report 2023-4, *Developing Data Strategies for Future Emergencies***

On June 22, 2023, the Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee will discuss the findings of Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report 2023-4, *Developing Data Strategies for Future Emergencies*, which the Council received and released on March 21, 2023. OLO will present a summary of the report at the Committee meeting.

The County Council directed OLO to prepare a report that examines how County agencies could collect and track data related to emergency relief funds in a way that would not delay the flow of funds in future emergencies. The report is available [here](#) on the OLO website.

OVERVIEW

Despite wide recognition of both the increased risk of emergencies and how data and evidence can be used to improve government performance, there are no definitive guidelines on how local governments should use data to improve emergency response. Indeed, while there are extensive literatures on evidenced-based policy and emergency management, limited attention has been given to the nexus between these topics. In this report, OLO bridges this gap by adopting a multi-method approach aimed at:

- a) Understanding how the County used data and evidence during the COVID-19 pandemic response; and
- b) Identifying promising practices to help the County government use data and evidence in future emergencies to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its relief programs without sacrificing expeditiousness.

MAJOR FINDINGS

OLO presents the following five major findings from the memorandum report:

1. According to interviews with other jurisdictions and literature on promising practices, establishing a government-wide data strategy during nonemergency times is key to responding quickly and accurately with a data-driven approach in emergency times.
2. Using data effectively during an emergency requires having developed a robust data infrastructure and data-driven culture during normal operations.
3. Expert guidance indicates that having a central recovery team for emergency response and recovery efforts are crucial.
4. When emergency relief funds are released, government agencies must balance the rapid release of funds while ensuring appropriate financial safeguards are in place.
5. County staff report that in general, departments work in an ad hoc manner, meaning each department creates, maintains and publishes data differently in a generally nonscheduled way. This can lead to noninteroperable data silos.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION ITEM

Based on the findings of this report, OLO suggests the following three recommendations and one discussion item for Council consideration.

Recommendation # 1. Expand County's capacity for cross-departmental data sharing.

In a large organization like Montgomery County Government, there is a large amount of data across departments that can be harnessed to create more efficient and effective programs. By creating mechanisms to foster regular communication between departments, employees can better understand how their respective departments can work together to further their missions.

One way to increase capacity is to expand CountyStat. A part of CountyStat's work is to serve as a forum to convene stakeholders to promote collaboration across organizational boundaries and address cross-cutting multi-departmental efforts that share a common goal. Countystat and OEMHS already collaborate on some initiatives, but it could be expanded to develop ways to address emergency situations with data-driven responses.

The County could also put forth a coordinated effort for each department to develop a formal data request process and name contact(s) to serve as data liaisons to make it easier to share data across departments.

Recommendation # 2. Develop a general framework that every department can refer to when setting up programs and developing performance indicators.

Best practices indicate the importance of a shared understanding of what data is and what it can do, in addition to a shared language in how data is spoken about in an organization. A framework of universal questions that every department can use to set up data collection and tracking for programs could foster this shared understanding.

When coming up with questions, it is important to think about the data needed to answer them. Questions could be organized around buckets of information that departments need to collect based on reporting guidelines and want to collect to track outcomes of programs. For example, if a program wants to evaluate its outreach, it can collect data that can answer questions like “Who is receiving outreach?” and “Did the outreach cause individuals to apply for the program?”

Recommendation # 3. Conduct data literacy training that focuses on creating a government-wide language/framework for thinking about data, in addition to courses for competency in software and analysis techniques.

Data literacy is defined as the ability to speak, read, write and translate data into actionable information. Promising practices indicate that it is important for all employees to increase their data literacy to increase data capacity across the entire organization. The Federal Data Strategy 2020 Action Plan directed all federal agencies to conduct a gap analysis of data skills to see where weaknesses and training needs lie.

The Council could consider a similar County-wide initiative to determine what training is most needed and would be the most beneficial to increasing data literacy across the County. Some suggestions for training topics include data vocabulary, data analysis skills and data story telling.

Discussion Item # 1. Discuss strategies for departments to centralize their data.

OLO found that one of the biggest issues in data sharing and collaboration is the siloing of information and data between departments. There are almost 700 systems and applications used within the County, which makes it difficult to share data.

The County’s Technology Strategic Plan outlines an ERP Data Warehouse to build, but this could be expanded to other data warehouses for various program data. Further, there should be an opportunity to bring together relevant interdepartmental representatives to work through the specifics of a data collection and centralization strategy. For example, IT professionals should be brought in to discuss ways to collect data in a standardized manner so that data can be shared and applied easily across departments.

