Investigating Seattle Police Department’s SeaStat

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Introduction

“CompStat will take the police department to the next level in observing, mapping and tracking patterns of crime and disorder and in mobilizing, analyzing and evaluating officer response. It is a major reform that I believe is the key to our future success in crime prevention, in efficient and effective deployment of SPD resources and in police accountability.”

— Seattle Mayor Ed Murray in his 2015–2016 budget speech

As government departments are tackling increasingly difficult issues, they are looking to data and evidence to help them make the best decisions. Since the early 1990s, police departments around the United States have been calling on performance analytics programs to provide a framework for analyzing performance and strategies to inform decision making. Through Bloomberg Philanthropies’ What Works Cities initiative, the Center for Government Excellence (GovEx) had the opportunity to learn more about Seattle Police Department’s (SPD) SeaStat program. SeaStat established and demonstrated real results in crime reduction nearly immediately because of several elements that can easily be replicated. SPD had a committed leader, an engaged public, and police officers who wanted to do all they can to serve their community using data and evidence.
The City of Seattle’s leadership has publicly committed to governing with performance management. Mayor Murray’s 2016 budget speech highlighted the city’s work with GovEx to build out its performance framework and capacity, and his desire to increase transparency by sharing more data with residents and the Seattle community. Seattle has taken a holistic approach to performance: to tie together the city’s strategic priorities, budgeting process, departmental performance plans, individual performance evaluations, performance dashboarding, and successful performance programs from across the city. SeaStat is a homegrown example of how performance management can work on the departmental level, filtering up data and evidence to executive leadership to inform decision making. SeaStat can be a model for other city departments and help to inform plans to meet the citywide performance improvement goal.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the history of stat generally and SeaStat more specifically; describe SeaStat’s principles, process, and successes; and surface best practices for other police departments, local governments, city departments, and other such organizations who are considering performance management or stat programs to aid strategic decision making.

A Brief History of Stat

SeaStat builds on decades of examples using data and evidence to improve outcomes through recurring meetings focused on performance. What is commonly known as “PerformanceStat,” “GovStat,” or simply “stat,” and has now been applied to different levels of government from cities to counties to federal agencies across many subject areas, began as a program called CompStat in New York City in the 1990s. Between 1960 and 1990, the rate of violent crime in NYC had increased seven-fold. NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani appointed formed BPD Commissioner Bill Bratton as NYPD commissioner, tasking him with getting crime under control in the city. The New York City Police Department (NYPD) started experimenting with using crime data to better deploy its resources and to hold the department accountable to a goal of reducing crime, rather than simply responding to it. The tenets of the model included accurate and timely intelligence shared by all, rapid deployment of resources, effective tactics and strategies, and relentless follow-up. The NYPD leadership attributed the large reductions in crime occurring in that decade in part to the CompStat management paradigm. CompStat’s successes were widely shared and police departments across the country began to employ these practices.
What was conceived as a performance management program for the police department in New York quickly grew. In 2000 then Baltimore City Councilmember Martin O’Malley visited New York to observe a CompStat meeting. When he was elected Baltimore’s Mayor, O’Malley expanded the concept citywide to cover other city management challenges, such as road repair and employee absenteeism, and named the program “CitiStat.” In 2006, when he became Governor of Maryland, O’Malley again adapted the CompStat model this time to fit the state’s challenges. Meanwhile other cities and city departments across the country created stat programs of their own (e.g., citywide: Louisville’s LouieStat, Kansas City, MO’s KCStat, Washington, DC’s CapStat; strategically focused: New Orlean’s BlightStat, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s HUDStat; departmentally focused: San Francisco’s DPWStat, the US Department of the Treasury’s TreasuryStat). Stat now exists in all levels of government, including a number of federal departments and has been used by private organizations as well.

SeaStat’s Evolution and Successes

When Chief Kathleen O’Toole was sworn in as the Chief of the Seattle Police Department (SPD) in June 2013, the department already had a history with stat programs, the two most recent programs being Crime Review and Crime Capsule; however, no formal meetings had been held in more than a year. As Chief O’Toole made her rounds and got acquainted with SPD’s five precincts, she quickly recognized that no one was looking at crime and operations data. After continuously receiving anecdotal responses to her requests for updates on property crime in response to public concern, she requested that the crime data center pull together monthly data on property crimes by precinct. The numbers told a different story than the anecdotal remarks: Motor vehicle thefts in the South Precinct were up 44 percent when precinct leadership had assured Chief O’Toole that everything was normal. Once Chief O’Toole realized that SPD wasn’t making decisions based on its data, she announced that SPD’s SeaStat meetings would start the following week.

SPD drew on what worked in CompStat to get the process started in short order. Even though they followed the four principles of CompStat, (see graphic) SPD did not wait until they had ideal data to get started. They simply began with the readily available data, and over the course of regular meetings improved on what they collected and used by standardizing data and finding workarounds for extracting data from legacy systems. By drawing on what worked in CompStat and conveying its importance across the department, SPD was able to jumpstart this iteration of

**PRINCIPLES OF SEASTAT**

1. **Accurate and Timely Information**
   Know what is happening

2. **Effective Tactics**
   Have a plan

3. **Rapid Deployment**
   Do it quickly

4. **Relentless Follow-up and Assessment**
   If it works, do more. If not, do something else
stat and make it stick. However, SeaStat’s success rests in the changes SPD made from its previous stat attempts and the traditional CompStat model:

- A clear vision and purpose for SeaStat originating from Chief O’Toole was the first step toward success. A former Boston Police Commissioner (and a former BPD colleague of Bill Bratton’s) and Chief Inspector of the Gardia Síochána Inspectorate in Ireland, Chief O’Toole knew what an effective stat program looked like and was comfortable with using data and evidence to drive decision making. She communicated the purpose for SeaStat throughout the department and talked about how SeaStat would help the department push toward its mission to prevent crime, enforce the law, and support quality public safety by delivering respectful, professional, and dependable police services. Additionally, SPD was operating under a federal consent decree. Chief O’Toole made it clear that SeaStat would be a forum to address and strategize some of the reforms coming out of the consent decree’s settlement agreement.

- A strong commitment and trust from SPD leadership was necessary to build buy-in. Chief O’Toole was extremely active in running the first year of SeaStat meetings and putting the right people in place to make sure the program succeeded. Her schedulers were quickly instructed not to book anything during SeaStat’s standing time. Command staff and precinct leaders followed her lead. O’Toole also relied on the knowledge and expertise of SPD staff who were very familiar with the Seattle community and SPD processes and data. Chief O’Toole communicated her reliance on SeaStat analysts and data-driven program leads to pull together the right data and provide proper context during the reinstatement of SPD’s CompStat program. She ensured that other departmental leaders and precinct commanders knew she trusted the program staff and took their analysis seriously.

- SPD didn’t wait for everything to be perfect and ready to go before starting meetings. The department just dove right in, working through its data and culture issues along the way, and kept lines of communication open about what was and wasn’t working. Although this wasn’t easy and required a lot of time and effort from the few staff members working on SeaStat, having a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration helped SeaStat participants get invested in the process and take ownership over its successes.

- SeaStat provided a supportive environment focused on problem solving, not finger pointing. SeaStat’s meetings are notable for their positive atmosphere and collegiality. During SeaStat meetings, Chief O’Toole recognizes officers in front of their peers. This positive reinforcement has spread throughout the meetings with officers frequently commend each other. In one meeting, when a precinct commander talked about focusing police presence in an area experiencing a lot of residential burglaries, Chief O’Toole tasked other precinct commanders with brainstorming ways in which they could get involved. Immediately, two other commanders offered up foot patrol time and analytical assistance. The precinct commander wasn’t blamed for not doing a better job reducing burglaries. He was instead offered support and brainpower in tackling the issue.

- Wide range of external stakeholders contributing to SeaStat meetings helped create a comprehensive plan of action across the city. For SeaStat to be effective, SPD knew that it had to engage a variety of parties and get their buy-in. Precinct commanders were
tasked with reaching out to their residents and encouraging them to attend meetings. Chief O’Toole and the SeaStat staff also reached out to community partners and related the importance of their presence and participation. A typical SeaStat meeting includes representatives from every precinct; SPD senior management; SeaStat analysts; Mayor’s office; county prosecutor’s office; district and city attorneys; University of Washington Police Department; Sheriff’s department; MetroPolice; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives; Department of Corrections; US Attorney’s office; Seattle University research partners; and community members (e.g., business improvement districts, youth violence initiative, school administrators). Each of these stakeholders provides important community context and gains a deeper understanding of how to support the city’s public safety goals.

- **SeaStat drew on existing SPD structures so it wasn’t as big of a lift for participants.** SPD believes that one of the biggest failures of a traditional CompStat meeting is that participants spend more than a week pulling together data that can’t be used on a daily basis. SeaStat wants SPD staff to use data constantly during their decision-making processes. Instead of writing and compiling briefing memos before meetings, as is common practice in traditional stat models, the crime data analysis units draw from existing crime bulletins written by SPD staff. By taking the time to standardize the bulletins and determine definitions for each metric, the analysts are easily able to pull together data for the SeaStat data-driven program lead to make screenshots for meetings. Additionally, SPD staff and SeaStat participants have a clear understanding of where the data comes from, trust that it is accurate, and can discuss it thoroughly in meetings.

- **SeaStat strived to be a public meeting focused on community engagement.** When she was appointed, Chief O'Toole felt she had a mandate to do a better job engaging the community in the policing process. To that end, SPD created micro-community policing plans (MCPPs), which were developed in collaboration with neighborhood leaders to set priorities and targets specific to each community. In SeaStat meetings, departmental leadership discusses its progress toward meeting these neighborhood-level targets. Often, neighborhood leaders will attend SeaStat meetings to join the discussion, provide feedback, and brainstorm new tactics for driving down crime. Further, SeaStat has been able to pull in data and feedback from non-traditional, community-based sources, such as Nextdoor.com and Facebook, to inform its analysis. The neighborhood engagement aspect differentiates the SeaStat model from some traditional CompStat models and is part of the reason this iteration of stat has been so successful in Seattle.

- **SeaStat’s public dashboard shares progress and successes with the community, encouraging the program’s sustainability.** SeaStat’s dashboard that gathers, displays, and discusses data trends is critical to the program’s success. Analysts use the dashboard to highlight trends, dig deeper into problem areas, and provide a platform for data-driven discussions with precinct commanders. This alone makes it an extremely valuable tool. Additionally, SPD uses the dashboard to engage members of the public, including the press and neighborhood associations, in the dialogue. Data can be filtered and displayed using several different attributes, including by micro-community policing plan areas. Using a common platform has been invaluable to engaging the community. Neighborhood leaders, nonprofit organizations, other governmental entities, and the
police department are all reviewing the same data and can work from common ground to solve problems around crime.

All of these innovations add up to an effective, evolving stat program that facilitates important data-driven conversations with community input and support.

Beyond improving the nature of conversations, SeaStat has helped drive organizational culture change. When SeaStat started, SPD was under a federal consent decree and morale was low. SPD used SeaStat to demonstrate change in the very practices that had led to the consent decree. In addition, crime analysts were getting excited about their new role in the organization and SeaStat participants were empowered to bring data into their daily operations, leading to notable wins. In the first year of SeaStat, motor vehicle thefts, which had been up 44 percent, were down 34 percent. Furthermore, SPD observed a 13 percent increase in major crime in 2014. During the course of SeaStat’s first year, major crime was reduced by 10 percent. SeaStat also helped SPD use geographic information systems (GIS) to map out hotspots which enabled the department to be more active with federal partners and determine if certain SPD actions resulted in displacing, instead of eliminating, crime.

**SeaStat in Practice**

Since its beginning in August 2014, SeaStat has seen numerous changes in its data collection and meeting structure. Figure 1 shows the current SeaStat workflow and preparation for meetings process. Reports make their way from the field into SPD’s databases using a standard process for data collection and analysis. With this process in place, preparations for SeaStat meetings are less taxing on the SeaStat team and participants. Crime analysts throughout SPD have been very supportive of SeaStat and are pleased with the important analytical role that they now play within SPD.

SeaStat is held on a biweekly basis. The meetings alternate between focusing on three precincts in-depth and two briefly, and three briefly and two in-depth so SPD can talk about other important topics, such as community engagement opportunities and compliance issues around the federal consent decree.

Initially, SeaStat meetings were driven by a PowerPoint presentation compiled by the SeaStat team. These presentations are posted publicly on the [SeaStat website](#). During the past few months, SeaStat has been transitioning to an internally built dashboard to both provide quick and easy access to SPD crime data and drive the conversation during the
meetings. Although, SeaStat agendas are sent out the day before the meeting, SPD staff are
encouraged to review the crime dashboard frequently as part of their daily decision making
activities. Since the dashboard was demoed during SeaStat meetings and throughout the
department, it has alleviated a lot of internal and external data requests and empowered SPD
staff and other external stakeholders to become familiar with data themselves. Additionally, all
the information is coming from the same place, so stakeholders are able to tell a cohesive story
with the data.

Figure 1: SPD’s SeaStat Workflow

The tone of the SeaStat meetings has evolved since its inception. Initially, the meetings focused
on questioning the data and its veracity. SPD never had a unified dataset to look at. Different
analysts were reaching different conclusions and SeaStat participants were getting defensive
about their precinct’s statistics. The turning point came during one meeting when Chief O’Toole
stepped in and noted that even if the data was off by an order of magnitude, ultimately, the trend
was going the wrong way. After a labor intensive effort by the SeaStat team to standardize data
definitions and collection processes, SeaStat can now focus on dealing with underlying issues and strategies.

This focus on understanding causes and brainstorming strategies for improvement has helped change SPD’s perception of stat meetings. Participants are seeing real results and buying into the process, which further helps to change the culture to one focused on data-driven decision-making and creative problem solving. SPD staff are talking about data in new and productive ways. They are using it to inform daily operations and celebrating successes based on what the data show. It has taken a lot of time (and some turnover in staff) to get to this point, but SPD is taking action to ensure that using data and evidence to inform decision making is ingrained in its culture.

What’s Next for SeaStat?

SPD views SeaStat as a work in progress and has big plans for its future. By continually iterating on SeaStat, SPD encourages a collaborative and communicative environment that looks to elicit feedback from internal and external stakeholders and participants.

SeaStat’s 2016 Goals

- **Do away with presentation slides.** It takes an inordinate amount of time to create slide decks for each SeaStat meeting (especially before the standardization of datasets and crime bulletins and the launch of SPD’s crime dashboard). Initially, the slide decks were all the SeaStat team had to get the job done and allowed SPD to communicate SeaStat conversations and findings with the greater Seattle community. SPD is currently migrating to a dashboard-driven meeting format, where the Program Lead applies filters to the dashboard based on the topic of discussion.

- **Formalize a SeaStat team.** In 2015, two SPD staff members were responsible for the entire SeaStat program (e.g., data collection, analysis, presentation creation, meeting coordination, follow-up, etc.). In 2016, SPD is creating a formal team with members from the command staff, IT, administrative support, and SPD’s existing analytical staff. Tasks will be redistributed among the team, making SeaStat preparation an easier lift. Bringing together a formal team to focus on SeaStat will help create continuity and coverage to ensure the sustainability of the program.

- **Improve SeaStat meeting practices.** SeaStat is in the process of revamping its meeting practices. For example, in 2016, the administrative support SeaStat team member will take meeting minutes and post them after each SeaStat session. Formal minutes, rather than one off emails, will allow follow up with participants and stakeholders to be more actionable, eliminating some of the confusion and questions that come up right before the next SeaStat meeting. These updates will help SPD share the hard work and successes of SeaStat within the department and publicly and continue to assert the importance of this process within SPD operations.

- **Continue building SPD’s Data Analytics Platform (DAP).** The federal consent decree gave SPD the opportunity to look back at its collected data and data systems, noting gaps in the information it tracked. SPD has been partnering with vendors to build the DAP, a warehouse that will store data on the consent decree, human resources, use of
force, and other important measures to reconcile the department's disparate data systems. This data warehouse will be used to perform more robust analysis of the data used in SeaStat, informing decision making and defining strategies for success.

SeaStat highlights so many things that performance management can do well. First and foremost, it demonstrates how a committed leader can use this process to drive change in her department. By communicating data’s importance and demonstrating her trust in the stat process, Chief O'Toole made it clear that all members of the department should rely on data to inform decisions and play a key role in formulating strategies for combatting crime. Further, SeaStat shows how a public process with public data can inform conversations and strategies that foster stakeholder engagement and ensure that all stakeholders are working together to accomplish larger goals. SeaStat relied on existing analytic capabilities and drew from existing data to set up the process quickly and without pulling staff away from other priorities. Finally, SeaStat demonstrates the importance of making sure that any performance management program continues to evolve.

SPD had history with stat programs which were no longer active. When it revived its regular stat meetings, it ensured that the current process was collaborative and responsive to the current culture of the department. A stat program must adapt to changes in priorities, departments, and leadership, while maintaining its focus on bringing data and evidence into regular strategic discussions.

How to Bring This Type of Stat Program to Your City/Department?

GovEx has spent a lot of time thinking and writing about how to help governments and departments create or revise performance management and stat programs. If you're interested in reading more about performance management, check out the following resources:

- GovEx's Performance Management Getting Started Guide
- GovEx's Setting Performance Targets: Getting Started Guide
- GovEx's Guide to Performance Alignment

Is your city or department approaching stat in an innovative or unique way? Please share your process and successes with us at govex@jhu.edu.
GovEx Author Bios

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Before coming to GovEx, Lena spent three years as a legal associate for a San Francisco Bay Area wage-and-hour class action law firm representing employees and translating attorney speak into understandable English. In her career, she has worked with governmental organizations across the United States both big and small from Austin-Travis County, TX, to Glens Falls, NY. Lena is an MPA graduate of UNC Chapel Hill’s School of Government, specializing in local government and performance.

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Matthew has addressed public policy challenges in local, state, national, and international fora. He got his start in government in the Office of Governor O'Malley in Maryland, where he covered transportation, business and economic development, and homeland security on the StateStat performance management team. Matt subsequently served as one of the founding members of the President’s Delivery Unit at the World Bank, which was established in 2014 to monitor institutional performance and to provide a forum for addressing planning and implementation issues. He has also worked as an associate at the EMBARQ Center for Sustainable Transport at the World Resources Institute, a senior research assistant at the Brookings Institution, and as a science and technology fellow at the U.S. Department of Energy. Matthew received a Bachelor in Arts in Economics from Tufts University and a Master in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

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Kristen joined GovEx after spending several years working for the State of Maryland. Most recently, she worked at the Maryland Energy Administration, where she managed relationships with federal partners and ran a grant program to bring innovative energy projects to the state. Earlier in her career, as an analyst with Governor O'Malley's StateStat Office, she focused on improving outcomes in Maryland’s housing, energy, and environment sectors. She also worked to establish the State’s first open data portal. Kristen was introduced to performance management through a graduate school internship during which she created a sustainability performance measurement system for the Charlottesville, Virginia region.