

A Great Tool for Cities – Milwaukee’s ASQ

Mayor Tom Barrett



As part of our commitment to performance excellence, the City of Milwaukee has taken its quality aspirations to the next level through an exciting collaboration with the American Society for Quality (ASQ). I am proud to call ASQ Milwaukee’s own, and we are proud to be the first city in America to join ASQ.

In August 2012, ASQ CEO Paul Borawski joined me at City Hall to make the official announcement. Also involved in our collaboration is the city’s Common Council. Because every council member recognized the value and benefits of using ASQ tools, ideas, and expertise to help meet strategic goals with limited resources, the Common Council passed a resolution endorsing our partnership by a unanimous vote.

The city had already been working to promote and implement quality improvement tools and techniques within all departments such as the Accountability in Management (AIM) program. AIM is my primary tool for overseeing the operations of city government, managing for results based on performance-driven and outcome data, and guaranteeing superior service.

Through AIM, the city has significantly boosted childhood immunization rates to suppress outbreaks of various vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, mumps, and pertussis as well as ensure protection of community health during seasonal influenza epidemics. After examining data that showed Milwaukee was falling short in meeting national public health childhood immunization goals, we worked with Milwaukee Public Schools and community-based organizations to target school readiness efforts on a broader childhood and student population, including those residing in our poorest neighborhoods. For example, in 2006, the immunization rate for public school students K-12 hovered around 61 percent. As of the 2013-14 school year, Milwaukee has achieved an approximately 87 percent immunization compliance rate for students in this same cohort. Similarly, primary series vaccination rates for children under three years of age are now at approximately 56 percent citywide as compared to 38 percent in 2006.

The AIM process has led to significant reductions in the number of workers’ compensation claims, recordable cases, incidence rates, and lost work days. The number of claims took a sharp dip from 3,097 in 2006 to 2,224 in 2010, just a year after the development and implementation of a risk management program that was sparked by the AIM process. The program requires department heads and safety personnel to develop annual safety plans, return-to-work programs, accident investigation protocols and policies, and other prevention measures.





In Milwaukee, we have maintained a municipal pension system that is fully funded and performing exceptionally well; and we are doing this at a time when a number of cities are facing massive pension shortfalls. In fact, there is no municipal pension system performing better than ours. In a January 2013 report released by Pew Charitable Trusts, Milwaukee ranked at the top of the list of cities in the nation that have the best-managed pension systems. The steps we have taken to achieve this goal reflect responsible actions on the part of city government and our commitment to performance excellence and a culture of quality.

In today’s economic climate, Milwaukee continues to face serious budget challenges, and we are not alone. Local governments must find more ways to trim costs and manage cash flow while continuing to provide excellent service. Partnering with ASQ has been an important phase in the City of Milwaukee’s quality improvement journey.

By using quality tools provided by ASQ, we are focusing on improving operating efficiencies and processes that will allow us to be a better steward of the community’s resources. Our partnership allows employees to connect with a full spectrum of ASQ benefits, includ-

ing the availability of quality improvement tools and training to maximize productivity and performance. Our staff has been accessing ASQ’s Knowledge Center, consisting of thousands of articles, case studies, and best practices. They have been empowered to participate in ASQ networking opportunities and certification programs as well.

One example of our recent work with ASQ involves the Milwaukee Health Department Laboratory—a first line of defense to protect the public against diseases and other health hazards. The lab processes over 80,000 specimens per year with more than 500,000 test results.

In October 2013, ASQ experts spent one week working with Health Department Lab employees—an effort that started only five months after the lab was named as one of 38 programs nationwide receiving a National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) “Model Best Practice Award.” Because managers and employees who run the lab refuse to rest on their laurels, they engaged ASQ for training in seven basic tools of quality improvement to create a culture of quality around the technical and administrative tasks associated with lab testing. Through techniques as

basic as daily “huddle” meetings, they have combated a “section silo” culture—the mindset that leads departments or employees to withhold information from others in the same organization and reduces efficiency in operations, reduces morale, and contributes to the demise of the organization’s culture. The Health Department staff now use a “visual display board” for workload analysis and “hot button” items—a tool that has substantially improved rapid response times and lab communication. These techniques and others have saved the city thousands in lab testing costs in just months, and over half of Health Department employees have earned the honor of becoming ASQ Certified Quality Improvement Associates (CQIAs).

Examples like this demonstrate that the City of Milwaukee is benefitting from the tools, ideas, and expertise of ASQ as we strive to achieve performance excellence and deliver quality services. It is our goal to apply ASQ process improvement techniques more widely in our organization in 2014 and beyond.

I encourage any city that is committed to excellence and quality to join ASQ. Milwaukee is a living example of how ASQ can be a great tool for any city—large or small—seeking to turn its performance goals into reality.