

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

Alert. Relaxed. Collegial.



Recap of 5/14/26 conversation with Courtney Hall, Principal Analyst and Program Evaluator, on Aligning Research and Practice in Local Government

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

This session attracted an impressive array of talented people spanning three generations, all of whom have used (or are planning new ways to use) data to evaluate performance and improve outcomes.

Our conversation was led by Courtney Hall, a multi-talented woman currently working for the County of San Diego. She's the only government analyst I know who became a professional ceramic artist in Santa Fe first and who has experience running for city council in San Diego – it reminds me of George Bellows' quote on a mug I bought at the National Gallery of Art: "Try everything that can be done ... Learn your own possibilities." You can see a sample of her work in the introductory slide at [[link to presentation](#)].

The presentation is value-added (don't skip it)

The remaining slides lay out the motivation for her office's learning agenda and the questions that are driving its research priorities, or "things we want to know." The purpose of the learning agenda is to bridge data-based evidence that answers relevant questions and the priorities of local users of evidence, such as area residents. Spend some time with the slides – their plain English and good graphics make things clear and easy to grasp. They may give you ideas.

When Courtney's team asked county residents what they thought should be researched and why, it did that in a variety of ways designed to reach the broadest swath possible, including one that I haven't seen before: They worked with library staffs to run banners advertising the survey on library computers. Interestingly, the positive reception and value that the team's learning agenda

has already produced has raised interest in Los Angeles, where one county has already begun using the learning agenda as a model.

What happened in the ensuing conversation

Once our conversation got rolling, it covered a lot of ground. Here's a sampling of what I heard:

One of the principal researchers behind the Partnership for Public Service's three acclaimed "From Data to Decisions" studies, produced in conjunction with the IBM Center for the Business of Government between Nov. 2011 and Nov. 2013, asked Courtney whether the San Diego board of supervisors was supporting her. This led to a robust discussion of the pressure generated by what elected officials need now vs. the longer timeframe it takes for things to change after evidence-based decisions have been implemented. Everyone had experienced that pressure to different degrees. The result was tacit knowledge transfer that may be useful to some participants and is the primary reason these events continue.

The former Partnership researcher said a few other important things:

- Her team used to ask what was the *researchable* question and where it fit in the larger context, and told us that lots of education is necessary.
- You've got to open the tent and have more people in the room.
- Sometimes you're tracking the wrong metrics. Correcting that may mean talking to different people. For example, who knew that the #1 indicator of nursing home quality of care was number of bedsores? Direct discussion with the carers, as opposed to the administrators, caused that answer to bubble up.

One participant, an expert who has made her living helping organizations change and is now embarking on a PhD to learn more about ways to keep change from coming undone, mentioned the power of using stories to persuade.

Someone else mentioned Baltimore CitiStat, which involves a data dashboard that works in tandem with 311 data, enabling city leaders to view and discuss near real-time performance metrics that matter to residents (e.g., potholes).

Another creative example of public outreach came from the Mine Safety and Health Administration inspector who joined us for the first time (Yay!): MSHA creates stickers for miner hard hats, with coordinated messages such as "Stand Down to Save Lives." The fact that miners wear them demonstrates community buy-in.

Finally, we heard about WeAllCount.com, a data equity training site based in Toronto that offers courses, coaching, and other resources – go look sometime – it’s pretty neat.

Additional Resources

Courtney also sent the following links for our post-event “who was in the room” message:

County of San Diego Learning Agenda

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/oepa/ASRP.html>

No Spin Evidence Review

<https://nospin.evidencebasedpolicy.org/>

Carol Weiss article “Where Politics and Evaluation Meet”

<https://www.eval.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Weiss-1973-WherePoliticsAndEvaluationMeet-1.pdf>

Participant affiliations

American Society for Public Administration (ASPA)

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter

County of San Diego, CA

CPS HR Consulting

Securities and Exchange Commission

U.S. Department of Education, retired

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, retired

U.S. Department of Labor/Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA)


ZMM Consulting LLC

People joined from San Diego, CA, Colorado Springs, CO, New York, NY, the Boston, MA area, and the DC/MD/VA Metro Area.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space.

Afterward, participants are sent a “who was in the room” message to facilitate ongoing connection. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley



HOW WILL YOU CONTRIBUTE?

Cooperating freely, learning on the fly, empowering ourselves, and navigating unknown waters beyond the edge of the comfort zone are the name of the game. We began our public leadership journey in calm harbors, and now we're surrounded by the white water of constant change. Business as usual isn't working well enough. We choose to gather our strengths and lead from wherever we are, applying our best efforts to the challenges of our time. Are you coming?