

CONNECTICUT

What Works in State Government

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One of the more important hearings of this legislative session occurred Feb. 13, but only about a dozen people attended. It took place before a legislative subcommittee that is taking baby steps toward making the state government justify how and why it is spending our money. This process has the eye-glazing name of “results-based accountability,” but forget labels; it’s one of the few serious attempts that has taken place in years to bring scrutiny, not to mention sanity, to the budget process.

Most people run their household budgets by, at minimum, trying to avoid wasting money. But state government isn’t like that. Sometimes hearings in the General Assembly will spotlight certain programs that are succeeding or failing, but those are rarities. Connecticut’s money management involves line-item budgeting. Most expenditures in the state budget are approved with a few percentage points added for inflation. The system does not keep track of money, rarely measures performance and, too often, rewards failure.

But change is in the air. Last year, the legislature started a pilot project on results-based accountability. This year the House speaker, James Amann, made it a subcommittee under the Joint Committee on Appropriations. The subcommittee could not tackle the entire budget, so it picked a few areas to examine, among them early childhood programs for children from birth to 5 years of age. The Department of Environmental Protection, to its credit, volunteered for scrutiny of its stewardship of Long Island Sound.

The chairwoman of the subcommittee, Representative Diana Urban, a Democrat who is also an economist, set forth questions concerning goals, how much money is spent in pursuit of them, and how success or failure is measured. She also asked for low-cost or no-cost

alternatives to achieving the goals. The basic question is simple: What works?

The answers were revealing. First, the state spends \$533 million on birth-to-5 programs, most of it on preparing children for school. The money is scattered across at least seven agencies, and there is little (and in some cases no) data on how effective it is. Making one agency responsible for administering this money would go a long way toward helping the effort succeed.

The D.E.P.'s testimony raised different issues. Asked to measure its performance against the goal of a clean Long Island Sound, the agency said that by several measures the Sound was becoming more polluted, a consequence of cuts in the state's Clean Water Fund. Proposed increases in the governor's budget should help matters. The agency has also suggested a public education campaign to help people lessen their use of fertilizer, to reduce the runoff flowing into the Sound. But scrutiny revealed that two-thirds of the department's budget comes from hunters, fishermen, state parks and federal funds. It is extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in funding that have occurred in recent years, something few lawmakers were aware of until the hearing.

No one expects the legislature to obtain this level of detail from all state agencies — yet. But the effort is already making waves. “We want to turn the budget on its head,” said the Appropriations chairwoman, Representative Denise Merrill, a Democrat. If she had her way, she said, each agency would put on one sheet of paper its goals and proof that what it is doing works. That will not happen this year, or the next. But more accountability is welcome — and overdue.