

Bob Behn's Performance Leadership Report

An occasional (and maybe even insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities for improving performance and producing real results in public agencies.



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On what performance-focused public executives can learn from

Washington State's "Target Zero"

In 1999, 631 people died from traffic accidents in the state of Washington. In 2000, Washington's Traffic Safety Commission set "Target Zero": zero traffic fatalities by 2030.

Washington was not, however, in a crisis. In 1996, fatalities had jumped to 712. Yet, over the next four years, they had dropped by over 10%. During the previous two decades, fatalities had declined at the rate of nearly 10 deaths per year. If that trend continued, the state would get to zero deaths in 2060. Not bad.

Indeed, many states might envy Washington. In 2000, it had 1.17 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. The U.S. rate was 1.53.

Still, the state could never eliminate fatalities by 2030 by simply working a little harder and a little smarter. To achieve its new, **stretch target**, it had to invent new strategies, new incentives, new collaborations, new ways of achieving this purpose.

Through its analysis, the Traffic Safety Commission identified twelve different **performance deficits** on which to focus: from impaired drivers,

to drivers and passengers not using appropriate safety restraints. For each, it created multiple strategies.

Also, the Commission and its key collaborators—the State Patrol (WSP) and the Department of Transportation (WSDOT)—didn't just set a target for 2030. They created a series of biennial targets. For example, the current target for 2017 is 309. (See chart.)

Thus, Target Zero doesn't inflict all of the accountability on those who will be in office in 2030. Every two years, citizens can see how well their public executives are doing.

The Commission, the State Patrol, and WSDOT are not trying to do this alone. By 2007, when they released an update of Target Zero, they had recruited nearly 50 partners: 22 state agencies, ten community, local, and regional organizations, two tribal nations, five federal agencies, and eight private organizations.

For each performance deficit, these collaborators identified multiple strategies. To reduce impaired driving, the 2007 plan specified expanding judicial and prosecutorial education on

DUI, and including tribal police in drug recognition training. For unrestrained drivers and passengers, their plan included conducting high-profile "child restraint inspection" events.

Target Zero does not try to get to zero highway fatalities instantly. Instead, it seeks to ratchet up performance. Nor does it inflict accountability on those who will be in office in 2030. It includes a series of biennial targets so that citizens can gauge progress.

This past August, the Commission released a draft of its 2013 plan for Target Zero. It pointed to significant decreases in fatalities for young drivers, and for drivers and passengers without safety restraints, but not for pedestrians and motorcyclists.

Significantly, for 2009-2011, impaired drivers were involved in half of the accidents with fatalities. This is now the plan's very top priority. Thus, for 2017, the target for these fatalities is 152—nearly half of 2002's 295. Among the strategies for this target, WSP has created Target Zero Teams working in three counties when lots of impaired drivers are on the road.

Washington calls Target Zero "ambitious" yet "doable." Yet, it didn't try to get to zero instantly. Rather, it chose to **ratchet up performance**—setting interim targets, creating strategies to achieve them, learning, and using this knowledge to develop new strategies. Then, the collaborators use each new level of success to energize and motivate their colleagues. **B**

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Washington Fatalities from Traffic Collisions 2002-2011

