2010 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR

Interview

Q&A: DIANA URBAN

Diana Urban (full profile) is a representative in the Connecticut General Assembly. Governing *Associate Editor Jessica B. Mulholland spoke with Urban about her childhood and the challenge of passing first-of-its-kind legislation to implement "results-based accountability." Here is an abridged and edited version of the interview:*

Your father [Edwin "Buzz" Schwenk] was a big-time political operative in New York state. Can you tell me a bit about him and what sort of influence he had on you and your career choices?

Clearly, my dad was my mentor. There's absolutely no question about it. He was one of those larger than life guys. He described himself as a milkman because his family came over from Germany and farmed the east end of Long Island. We actually supplied milk to almost all of Long Island. He became the Republican leader of the Suffolk County Republican Party, so I grew up with my dad hanging out with Rockefeller, Jacob Javits, Reagan -- that was the norm. He would introduce you to the powerful as if they were your next door neighbor. One thing he said over and over was, "Put your hand in a bucket of water and pull it out; see how fast the water fills it in," which essentially was his iteration of, "Everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time." He lived that. It basically meant you treat everybody with dignity and respect, and that's the bottom line. He was a beloved figured, not only on the Republican side, but the Democratic side too. People ask me often why I have the guts and courage to do what I do, that I don't mind getting out on the issues and I don't mind taking hits. A lot of it goes back to my dad.

What would you say ultimately led you to your position as a Connecticut State Representative?

I was teaching economics, I was on the Planning and Zoning Commission in North Stonington and I did a lot of work on land preservation and animal cruelty issues. I told my students over and over, "One of these days I'm going to run. One of these days I'm going to run." When my son left for college, there was an open seat, and I said, "That's it; I'm running. I'm going to do this."

I'm not sure if you know this, but I switched parties. I ran as a Republican, and after three terms as a Republican, I switched in 2006. I was pushing issues that my colleagues on the Republican side were not comfortable with, which was pretty amazing to me because my major areas were results-based accountability (RBA), environmental issues, animal cruelty as a red flag for future violent behavior, and small business and microenterprise. I was getting a lot of pushback.

Speaking of results-based accountability, I know that it's an approach that forces decision-makers to focus on outcomes, not process. Can you elaborate?

That's another one of my advantages coming from academia. I knew about planned programming budgeting, performance-based budgeting and total quality management. I taught it, right? I know that it's not a quick study. I was very interested in legislators understanding the process and legislators being able to be part of it. The norm in budgeting is you have your budget, and that's your base. Nobody ever looks to see what's in the base. So what's going on with that program we passed 30 years ago? I don't know. What are we doing with it? Is it really getting us where we want to go? I don't know, and quite frankly, we don't have time to look. So we looked at that and said, "That's never going to get government to where it's accountable, transparent and efficient, what kind of system will?"

We had in place performance budgeting. We passed it. It was in statute from 1982, I think. We just didn't follow it. I started introducing it over and over again as performance-informed budgeting, and a little bit down the road, we hit on this results-based accountability. That's what really got us going. When I saw RBA, I said "Aha! This makes sense. This is something I can show someone and they'll get it, they'll understand." You have a result you want to get like a clean and healthy Long Island Sound or all children ready for school within their developmental ability by age 5. Then you start to work backwards and say, "Are the programs we have here getting us there?" And then you ask the agencies to give you data to show you that they're getting you there.

The biggest thing about this is it appears that I'm the only one who's been able to lead this from the legislative side. You can't do anything like this unless your legislators and your agencies find it useful. An executive can just take out his giant hammer and slam it and say, "You have to do this, you're my agencies, you're my commissioners, you will do RBA." But if the executive is sitting there saying, "No, you don't really have to do it," which is what was happening, then it makes it that much more difficult. We want to see things in terms of RBA so we can see the dynamic there, right? We're saying you have to; the governor is saying, no, you don't have to.

What was it that got you over that hump-that opposition from the governor?

I would say that the reason it's successful is that it's useful. People understand it, they understand results and they understand when a program isn't getting you to those results. When we get to the program, we have three fundamental questions that you have to answer: How much did you do, how well did you do it and is anyone better off? It should come as no surprise that a lot of them don't have the data, and that's where this becomes such an incredible tool. The economy's in a bad place. If you guys can't show us with data-driven analysis that this program is working, the money's going somewhere else.

How long does the actual review process take?

It's taken six years for us to train agencies, to have agencies realize that we're very serious about this and to be able to say we are doing our appropriations in terms of results-based accountability.

And that's what I keep banging the drum about-do you want to see a 10 or 15 percent across-the-board cut when you know you're going to cut really great programs, and you're going to cut programs that are crummy. The idea here is to say which ones are really great and which ones are crummy.

What would you say has been the biggest accomplishment in results-based accountability since its inception?

It has raised the awareness in the Legislature of what you can do. That it is doable. When I have people talking about RBA in every committee meeting you go to, and saying, "Wait a second, has an RBA been

done on this? And if not, why not?" That's my biggest accomplishment-that people are conversant, they understand it, and they know that we're going there. But if you're not tenacious, if you're not willing to run into the wall, run into a dead end, figure out how you get around that, figure out how you get people to believe we can do this, you're never going to get there. It takes an enormous amount of tenacity.

So in addition to being tenacious, what is your advice to other states looking to implement results-based accountability?

I would say look at your budgets, and look at where you're headed. Realize that there is a system out there that can make sense of how you find programs that work. Look at every political campaign, what do they say? "We don't want any programs that don't work." Right? But do they ever give you a way of finding the programs that don't work? They always go back to slash and burn. "We're just going to cut 10 percent across the board, because we don't really know which programs don't work." So my saying to every state out there is that we do have a way. You can do this so you don't have to be forced into cutting without knowing what the impact of those cuts are going to be. You seriously can do it.

Photo by David Kidd