

## Survey Background

### Why the survey was conducted

The purpose of the Adams County Quality of Life survey was to establish a baseline for residents' levels of satisfaction with services provided by the County, to give residents an opportunity to provide input to the County on areas of strength and opportunities for improvement and to communicate priorities for planning purposes and resource allocation. The County anticipates using the results of the survey in a variety of ways including performance based budgeting, the County Report Card project for performance management, the formulation of department goals, the County Comprehensive Plan and other County plans, initiatives and programs.

### How the survey was conducted

The questionnaire used for the Adams County Quality of Life survey was developed through an iterative process with members of the Board of County Commissioners, other elected officials, appointed officials and department directors. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in *Appendix F: Survey Materials*.

Three thousand households in Adams County were randomly selected to receive the survey. About 80% of the county's population lives within the boundaries of incorporated towns or cities from which they also receive local government services, while only 20% resides in the unincorporated part of the county. In order to ensure that a sufficient number of responses came from those in the unincorporated portion of the county, the 3,000 households were divided equally among the incorporated and unincorporated portions (1,500 households in each).

Each of the survey recipients were contacted by mail a total of three times in May 2012. The first mailing was a prenotification postcard announcing the upcoming survey. About a week after the prenotification postcard was sent the first wave of the survey was sent. This packet included the questionnaire with a cover letter signed by the Chair of the Board of County Commissioners on behalf of all the elected officials, appointed officials and department directors of Adams County. Included in the packet was a postage-paid return envelope. A week later a second survey was mailed, with instructions to recycle the survey if the household had already responded to the first survey. A copy of the survey materials can be found in *Appendix F: Survey Materials*.

Of the 3,000 addresses selected to receive the survey, 64 were identified by the post office as vacant. A total of 503 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 17%. It is customary to describe the precision of estimates made from surveys by a "level of confidence" and accompanying "confidence interval" (or margin of error). The 95 percent confidence interval for this survey is generally no greater than plus or minus four percentage points around any given percent reported for all survey respondents.

Survey results were weighted so that the age, gender, race/ethnicity and housing tenure (rent versus own) were represented in the proportions reflective of the within both the incorporated and unincorporated areas of the county, as well as the entire county. (For more information see the detailed survey methodology in *Appendix E: Survey Methodology*.)

## How the results are reported (what is included in this report)

For the most part, frequency distributions (the percent of respondents giving each possible response to a particular question) and the “percent positive” are presented in the body of the report. The percent positive is the combination of the top two most positive response options (e.g., “excellent” and “good”). The full set of frequencies can be found in *Appendix B: Responses to Survey Questions*.

On many of the questions in the survey, respondents gave an answer of “don’t know.” The proportion of respondents giving this reply is always shown in the appendices. However, “don’t know” responses have generally been removed from the analyses presented in the body of the report, unless otherwise indicated. In other words, the majority of the tables and graphs in the body of the report display the responses from respondents who had an opinion about a specific item. Tables in *Appendix B: Responses to Survey Questions* display the proportion of respondents answering “don’t know” to each question where a “don’t know” response was included.

For some questions, respondents were permitted to select multiple responses. When the total exceeds 100% in a table for a multiple response question, it is because some respondents are counted in multiple categories. When a table for a question that only permitted a single response does not total to exactly 100%, it is due to the convention of rounding percentages to the nearest whole number.

Selected survey results were compared by respondent characteristics, including where the respondents’ residences were located, age of respondent, type of housing and more. These crosstabulations can be found in *Appendix C: Selected Survey Results by Respondent Characteristics*.

### **Benchmark comparisons**

Local governments can use comparative information provided by benchmarks to help interpret their own resident survey results, to create or revise community plans, to evaluate the success of policy or budget decisions, and to measure government performance. Taking the pulse of the community has little meaning without knowing what pulse rate is too high and what is too low. When surveys of service satisfaction turn up “good” citizen evaluations, it is necessary to know how others rate their services to understand if “good” is good enough or if most other communities are “excellent.” Furthermore, in the absence of national or regional comparisons, a jurisdiction is left with comparing its open space and parks rating to its street maintenance rating. That comparison is unfair as street maintenance always gets lower ratings than parks. More illuminating is how residents’ ratings of street maintenance compare to opinions about street maintenance in other communities, and to resident ratings over time.

A sheriff department that provides the fastest and most efficient service – one that closes most of its cases, solves most of its crimes, and keeps the crime rate low – still has a problem to fix if the residents rate sheriff services lower than ratings given by residents in other areas with objectively “worse” departments. Benchmark data can help that sheriff department – or any other department – to understand how well citizens think it is doing. Without the comparative data, it would be like bowling in a tournament without knowing what the other teams are scoring.

NRC's database of comparative resident opinion is comprised of resident perspectives gathered in citizen surveys from approximately 500 jurisdictions whose residents evaluated local government services. Conducted with typically no fewer than 300 residents in each jurisdiction, opinions are intended to represent over 30 million Americans. NRC has innovated a method for quantitatively integrating the results of surveys that we have conducted with those that others have conducted. These integration methods have been described thoroughly in *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, and in NRC's first book on conducting and using citizen surveys, *Citizen Surveys: how to do them, how to use them, what they mean*, published by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Scholars who specialize in the analysis of citizen surveys regularly have relied on NRC's work [e.g., Kelly, J. & Swindell, D. (2002). Service quality variation across urban space: First steps towards a model of citizen satisfaction, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 24, 271-288.; Van Ryzin, G., Muzzio, D., Immerwahr, S., Gulick, L. & Martinez, E. (2004). Drivers and consequences of citizen satisfaction: An application of the American Customer Satisfaction Index Model to New York City, *Public Administration Review*, 64, 331-341]. The method described in those publications is refined regularly and statistically tested on a growing number of citizen surveys in our proprietary databases.

Jurisdictions in NRC's benchmark database are distributed geographically across the country and range from small to large in population size. Comparisons may be made to all jurisdictions in the database or to a subsets of jurisdictions (within a given region or population category such as medium-sized cities). Despite the differences in jurisdiction characteristics, all are in the business of providing local government services to residents. Though individual jurisdiction circumstances, resources, and practices vary, the objective in every community is to provide services that are so timely, tailored, and effective that residents conclude the services are of the highest quality.

National and Colorado benchmark comparisons have been provided in this report when similar questions on the Adams County Quality of Life Survey are included in NRC's database and there are at least five jurisdictions in which the question was asked, though most questions are compared to more than five other cities across the country or in Colorado. Jurisdictions to which Adams County was compared can be found in *Appendix E: Survey Methodology* on page 196.

Where comparisons for quality ratings were available, Adams County's results were noted as being "above" the benchmark, "below" the benchmark or "similar" to the benchmark. In instances where ratings are considerably higher or lower than the benchmark, these ratings have been further demarcated by the attribute of "much," (i.e., "much below" or "much above"). These labels come from a statistical comparison of Adams County's rating to the benchmark where a rating is considered "similar" if it is within the margin of error (less than five points on the 100-point scale); "above," "below," "more" or "less" if the difference between Adams County's rating and the benchmark is greater the margin of error (between five points and nine points); and "much above" or "much below" if the difference between Adams County's rating and the benchmark is more than twice the margin of error (greater than 10 points).

## **How to use the results**

Modern management relies on measures of performance to assess and improve and there is no more fundamental measure of the work done by local government than that which comes from the perspectives of residents served. This scientific survey of Adams County residents is a window into the county's performance. Like other measures of performance – budgets, service outputs and efficiency metrics – resident opinion offers a view of how things are going. But unlike other measures of service quality, resident opinion is the bottom line in local government. Many other measures of government work describe effort (“how hard we try”); citizen opinion describes achievement (“how well we do”).

The survey results can be thought of like an instrument panel on an airplane – it gives government officials and staff indications of whether they are on course or need to make corrections. It might flag problem areas. Results of a survey this broad describe conditions but do not explain why they exist.

Perceived meaning and possible decisions and actions in response to the report are expected to differ depending on the role of the reader. For County Commissioners and executive staff it may be enough to get the overall sense of how things are going at the same time that department staff and boards or advisory groups will want to look in more detail at the specific parts of the survey that describe areas for which they are responsible. Not only are resident ratings of service quality important but resident perspectives about the quality of community life and the characteristics of Adams County are key as well, because a quality community is the ultimate desired outcome of all the government provides.

To get the most out of the report, it should be made public and presented to elected officials and staff. Groups of staff should be charged with considering the findings. The most effective report results in action plans recommended by stakeholders and reviewed, modified and approved by commissioners. Start by identifying what results were most surprising and which were expected. Move on to focus on a small number of areas – two or three (or a different, but manageable number) – that should be improved, sustained or clarified. The process does not have to be elaborate, but it must be intentional. Appropriate action requires thoughtful consideration of findings and motivation to improve.