



Barbara Lamb, program manager City of San Diego



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO GOES LEAN

By JENNIFER DAVIES

Lean Six Sigma training helps city workers improve customer service and boost efficacy.

The term “process improvement” might sound dry, but if the concept is done well, it can save time and money. In fact, it even has the potential to save lives.

That was the lesson of a new partnership between UC San Diego Extension and the City of San Diego that helped city staff find ways to reduce 911 wait times, expedite street light maintenance, and improve customer service for libraries and infrastructure projects. These changes resulted from city staff’s participation in a process improvement training program known as Lean Six Sigma that UC San Diego Extension offers.

Companies around the globe use the principles of Lean Six Sigma to identify problems and deliver data-driven solutions. Almis Udrys, director of the city’s Performance and Analytics Department, said he saw the UC San Diego Extension’s Lean Six Sigma training as a way to help city staff begin to look at the issues facing the City of San Diego in new ways.

“I see this training as opening a door to a new culture at the city—a culture that embraces innovation, data-enabled decision making, and a commitment to continuous improvement,” Udrys said. “It really is an extension of Mayor Kevin Faulconer’s vision for a city government that is as innovative as the people it serves.”

The city sent seven of its employees through the 16-week program. The projects resulted in a variety of improvements, including:

Reduced emergency call times: By revising the information input screen and automating a portion of the call process, a working group from the Fire-Rescue Department was able to reduce the length of 90 percent of calls by 16 seconds in the first few months—a 16 percent improvement compared to the same time period a year ago. The city calculated that the reduced call times have the potential to save an estimated additional 22 lives annually.

Improved library material delivery: To reduce the wait times for library patrons to receive requested books and other materials, one team analyzed how to improve the material sorting process. By identifying and cutting out a step in the sorting process that consumed a significant amount of time and motion, the team was able to come up with a simplified process to increase its productivity by 42 percent, which was valued at an estimated \$121,953 of annual cost avoidance in terms of staff time.

Faster street light maintenance: A team from the Transportation and Storm Water Department created a new workflow system that reduced the lead time for street light maintenance by about three days and resulted in an estimated \$15,000 in savings. In follow-on phases, further efficiencies will be gained via the elimination of paper order forms.



Almis Udry, director of the City of San Diego's Performance and Analytics Department

Improved operations at the Public Works Customer Service Center: By eliminating paper forms, transitioning to newer technologies, and eliminating unnecessary steps in the process, a team from the Transportation and Storm Water Department was able to shorten the time it takes to handle customer complaints. The changes also resulted in an estimated cost avoidance of around \$113,000 per year and improved communication with customers.

Barbara Lamb, a program manager for the city, spearheaded the efforts to reduce 911 call time waits. She said the Lean Six Sigma tools were invaluable not only in engaging all the stakeholders, but also for crunching historical data to come up with what she called an "elegant solution." As for the results of the project, Lamb summed it up in one word: "priceless."

"A major reason we all work for the City of San Diego is that we want to make the community a better place," she said. "To be able to do something that has a potential to save 22 lives a year, it really is priceless."

The goal of the program is for each participant to take the lessons they learned through Lean Six Sigma to other city departments to help them improve efficiency and how they serve their customers: the citizens of San Diego.

"As you know, sometimes in government, change is not easily welcomed," said Maureen Jugar, a program manager at the city who worked on a project for expedited streetlight maintenance. "With the culture of Lean Six Sigma, you have the tools to help others discover ways to do things more efficiently. It doesn't just apply to work. It can apply to your home, to your kids, to your friends. It can apply to just about anything."

That is the goal, Udry said, to apply the lessons learned in Lean Six Sigma to tackle any number of issues facing the city.

"The results of this program really add up, which is why Mayor Faulconer and the City Council have been so supportive of our efforts," Udry said. "Every productivity gain, no matter how small, means a better

experience for each resident, in line with the city's mission to effectively serve and support our San Diego community."

Hugo Villar, director of Business, Science and Technology at UC San Diego Extension, said the partnership with the City of San Diego is part of Extension's larger mission to ensure that organizations and individuals have the skills they need to bolster the region's economy and quality of life.

"In this rapidly changing world, we know employees need to constantly add new skills to advance their careers and to benefit the organizations where they work," Villar said. "Our Lean Six Sigma courses enable people to identify problems and come up with innovative solutions, which ultimately allow them to better serve customers and clients. It is important that a research university such as UC San Diego provides access to the most current organizational tools and knowledge to benefit the citizens of San Diego. This partnership is a clear example of how we are doing just that." ■