

Improving the Quality of Public Open Spaces in Santiago, Chile



City-contracted ground maintenance services being delivered in parks within Santiago, Chile.

As part of Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities initiative, the Government Performance Lab provided pro bono technical assistance to help the Municipality of Santiago reform its parks maintenance contract management practices. The initiative aimed to improve the quality of the Municipality's public open spaces, while enhancing accountability in service delivery.

The Challenge: Santiago was experiencing a pronounced increase in the costs of its parks maintenance contracts along with a deteriorating quality in service delivery. The increase in costs was driven by a combination of higher labor costs, a greater number of park users, and persistent hidden costs of doing business with the Municipality. Municipal inspectors applied inconsistent standards to assess performance and administer fines, creating a punitive culture in contract administration. Vendors internalized these additional costs by inflating their bids and falling short on service delivery.

In 2017, in response to fiscal constraints, the Municipality sought to increase the efficiency of the US \$9 million spent annually on maintaining its parks and green areas. The Parks & Gardens Department developed new outcomes-oriented solicitations, which removed onerous specifications and provided operational flexibility for vendors. An initial solicitation successfully generated savings of 24% of total contract value. However, the Department lacked a system to manage the new contracts effectively. Despite new contract terms, the contract administration preserved its focus on monitoring activities and exercising punitive actions instead of managing results. With inspections relying on a paper-based system, the Department's management lacked instruments to track contract performance and reliable information to collaborate with vendors.

Applying Results-Driven Contracting Strategies: To improve the quality of public open spaces while maintaining the savings of the new solicitations, the GPL and Santiago:

- 1) **Defined key outcome metrics to assess the quality of service delivery.** Based on interviews with departmental staff and vendors, the GPL developed objective and quantifiable performance indicators across five areas: cleanliness, grass quality, irrigation, accessibility, and outdoor furniture. One additional metric captured serious violations compromising public safety, such as hazardous residues, dangerous playgrounds, or damaged irrigation systems. Through multiple on-site exercises, departmental staff provided feedback to refine the new metrics. The workshops also served as training for field inspectors on how to apply the new evaluation standards consistently across different contracts and park zones.
- 2) **Reformed inspection routines to collect meaningful data on service delivery.** Santiago's green areas stretch across 520 acres and include parks, plazas, playgrounds, and gardens. In the past, vendors frequently neglected the areas and activities with less official oversight, resulting in permanent damages to municipal property. To provide a complete assessment of each contract and capture maintenance needs across zones, the new approach required inspectors to conduct a high-level survey of the entire area of the contract and detailed reviews of each zone on a weekly basis. To promote solutions-oriented decision-making, the new inspection routes further enabled gathering data by zone on usage levels and factors affecting park quality beyond the control of vendors, including large public events, improper parking, and homeless camps.
- 3) **Developed tools to track and analyze contract performance.** To facilitate data collection, the Department rolled out a new electronic inspection system using a Google Form. The questionnaire captured data on maintenance outcomes by contract and zone following the indicators and inspection routines described above. By aggregating inspection results, the new system helped the Department identify trends in service delivery and compare performance across contractors. Moreover, the system enhanced accountability and personnel management by collecting information on the day-to-day activities of field inspectors.
- 4) **Established active contract management to advance strategic partnerships.** The Parks & Gardens managers set up regular, data-informed meetings with vendors to review contract performance. These meetings served as a venue to share the new contract monitoring methodology, identify trends, and solve specific operational challenges. In the past, communication between the Department and its vendors was mostly reactive. The new system fostered collaboration by connecting staff positioned to improve service provision.

The Results: The Parks & Gardens Department has widely adopted active contract management practices and tools, with field inspectors consistently completing their routes and uploading the corresponding forms. An internal survey showed that inspectors consider the system as adding value to their work, aiding performance tracking, and providing reliable evidence before taking action. Vendors have expressed interest in using insights from the system to improve their monthly work plans. The new performance management system is supporting the release of additional outcomes-focused solicitations from the Parks & Gardens Department. The Municipal Planning Secretary is considering applying similar techniques to manage other high-priority contracts.