Martin O'Malley Joins MetroLab Network as National Advisor

Ben Miller | May 5, 2016

The MetroLab Network has a new face, and a pretty famous face at that: former Maryland governor, Baltimore Mayor and Democratic presidential candidate Martin O'Malley.

The group announced the morning of May 5 that O'Malley will become a senior fellow with the group, which will first involve building an advisory committee to help connect the knowledge gleaned from city-university partnerships all around the country. The partnerships are aimed at not only developing technology that can help government work better, but sharing that knowledge so other cities can quickly adopt successful ideas.

O'Malley is a pretty natural fit for the role, said Ben Levine, interim director of the network — after all, one of his crowning achievements as governor and mayor was the development of programs aimed at gathering data and using it to improve the performance of government workers. At the Baltimore level, it was called CitiStat, and its results led to a wave of cities across the country adopting similar ideas.

"We chose him because he has a track record in having really led kind of revolutions in terms of embracing data and output-driven government," Levine said. "He did it as

mayor, he did it as governor, and to us, MetroLab Network is really a new frontier of possibilities in performance-based government and data-driven government."

And yes — the fact that he's a national political figure also helps.

"I think what's really compelling about having the governor on the board is to inspire mayors and university provosts to [explore] the partnership model," he said.

That's a big part of the network's mission. Since its launch last year — buoyed by the support of the White House and a $1 million grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the MetroLab Network has become a sort of pulpit from which evangelists can preach the gospel of collaboration between government and academia. The network has grown from about 20 city-university partnerships in late 2015 to 35 today.

And it's not even just cities and universities anymore, but also counties and research institutions such as national laboratories. They're all working together on projects — some tech-focused, some operation-focused, some economy-focused — that draw on the concept that government and academia have a lot to offer each other.

In fact, O'Malley said, cities have largely replaced states as the laboratories for innovation these days. He pointed to trends of growth in cities, of urban renaissance, of high-profile challenges with even more high-profile solutions.

"If you were to draw a few circles in terms of the next horizons of human progress, call one of those circles prosperity, call another one security, call another one justice — whether criminal justice or economic justice — another one sustainability, all those things overlap and find their greatest opportunities for progress in the cities of this world," O'Malley said.

There are a lot of emerging ways to tackle those challenges, from a government perspective. The U.S. Department of Transportation has sparked a national race for cities to come up with ways to make mobility more efficient and equitable. Others are focused on how to plan better for sustainable development. Some want to improve citizen participation in government.

What O'Malley sees as most exciting is a concept that bridges all of that: data.

"You look at some of the things that our partner cities are doing, like South Bend [Indiana] with the smart [dials] in their sewer and stormwater systems, you look at what Pittsburgh and Mayor (Bill) Peduto are doing with the sensors in their traffic lights," he said. "It's about improving what we're already doing, but it's also about bringing forward new solutions."

By gathering data, O'Malley said, government gathers the tools to do its work better on a day-to-day basis. But there are a lot of challenges to building a system that collects, analyzes and acts on data efficiently — there are issues of old computer systems, a need for connectivity, a need for sensors. And if that's not enough, there's always the issue of funding, and the imperative to show a return on investment.

Which is all to say that it can be nice for a government worker to see that something has been done before, and works.

"It's been my experience that every mayor wants to be the best at doing something second," O'Malley said.

The MetroLab Network is meant to help connect those second mayors to the first mayors, and to put mayors in contact with researchers who can help build out solutions to problems or new systems that can do work better.

The advisory council will also likely introduce a component to the network that hasn't been prominent before now: private industry. Along with nonprofits, foundations, government representatives and academics, Levine said the advisory council will likely include some people who can help cities take certain technologies past the demonstration phase and into deployment.

Take sensors, for example — universities might be able to build sensors for gathering data and work with cities to test them out, but if a municipal information technology department wants to deploy a wider fleet of those sensors, they might find it necessary to turn to a private company to build more.

"[The private sector piece is] more tilted toward areas where you have a physical product or a software product that can be scaled," Levine said. "I'd say more that than a solution around how universities could deal with an education issue, or what qualifies more as social science."

The first step to it all, O'Malley said, will be listening to what individual players in the network are doing as it holds its Spring Summit in San Diego next week. The feedback he gets will help him determine what direction to go when looking for members of the committee, he said.

Through it all, O'Malley said, he wants to emphasize the idea that government is very much a part of solutions to today's problems.

"You can talk until you're blue in the face about prosperity or health or a sustainable future," he said, "but they all require good governance, and technology makes that possible on a global scale."

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