When the state auditor’s office examined cellphone use by state employees, it found $1.7 million in savings from unused phones and cheaper phone plans.

Now – under a new program of the state auditor’s office – any city or county can adopt the same method of review, quickly and easily, to examine their own cellphone use. Following the state model, Pierce County found it was locked into plans for almost 10 times as many minutes as its workers actually used.

It’s right there on the website of the Local Government Performance Center, among the downloadable “toolkits”: How to Reduce Cell Phone Costs. It’s one small piece of a dramatic and evolving effort to take the expertise and knowledge gathered for after-the-fact audits and make them available as tools for improving the performance and cutting the costs of government.

Larisa Benson, director of the performance audit division, said the project grew from questions posed by leaders of local governments: “If you guys are sitting on a pile of best practices and better ways to do things, why don’t you share that with us up front? Why do I have to wait to be audited?”

Benson is spearheading the project, which in recent weeks made the toolkits available online – from how to use Twitter to Fiscal First-Aid Kits to “lean strategies” for dealing with tightening budgets. The performance center is also gathering local leaders from around the state in a series of ongoing discussions about ways to expand and improve how governments gather and use information, how they measure what they do, and how they can communicate more clearly and usefully with citizens.

That final point is crucial. The center places an emphasis on “plain talk” – teaching people who work for government how to drop the complicated language that clouds what they do and communicate clearly with citizens.
“I actually feel it’s a civil right to be able to understand what your government is saying,” Benson said. “We’ve got a long ways to go on that.”

The political rhetoric about government devolves inevitably into ideological dead-ends: Kill it or keep it. Demonize or glorify. There is a particular insistence that government is always ineffective, always lousy, always hurtful rather than helpful — Reagan said that, you know — but the idea lurking behind that criticism never seems to be that we should make it better, or that such a goal is even possible.

What if we honestly, actually tried to make it better, and when we found things that worked, spread them around?

“I think there are plenty of examples where government does a good job,” Benson said. “It’s usually not what makes the paper.”

Spokane’s Patrick Jones is one of the leaders meeting regularly to share ideas. Jones oversees the Spokane Community Indicators Initiative, an innovative and rapidly expanding project that compiles community data and makes it available online. The Spokane County website went up six years ago. In the years since, Jones and his team at Eastern Washington University have worked with six other communities, including Kootenai County and Walla Walla, to set up their own projects.

Now, the Local Government Performance Center offers a toolkit for community indicators projects.

“Behind the whole community indicators network across the country is the idea of democratizing data,” Jones said. “Taking information out of the hands of the few and putting it into the hands of the many.”

The kinds of information Jones collects go beyond measuring government processes and aim toward providing a broader picture of community well-being. One of the things Benson’s project strives to do is provide local government leaders methods for connecting the two — ways of examining whether government services are doing what they’re meant to do, in real-world terms.

The project is very much evolving. The toolkits for local government went online Nov. 5. The leadership group for the project is meeting regularly and trading ideas. The project had a $1 million budget over the last biennium, which amounted to 5 percent of the sales-tax funds dedicated to performance audits from voter-approved Initiative 900.
With a new auditor, Troy Kelley, replacing the retiring Brian Sonntag, and with the Legislature tackling another straitened budget in January, we should hope that this project stays on course in a time of change and strife.

Because it might just be an example of that elusive creature: good government.