



Public Service 2.0

Program fosters civic-minded web development

A new nonprofit organization has enlisted some of the nation's most talented technologists to build web apps that will help cities work better.

Code for America has challenged 20 fellows, chosen in January 2011 from a pool of 360 applicants that included web developers, designers, and entrepreneurs, to work in small teams building applications that will make local governments more open, efficient, and responsive to citizens. The applications they devise will accomplish these goals through improving data sharing, enhancing communication between the governed and governing, enabling better decision making, and encouraging community action.

Addressing these problems will call upon not only the technical skills of fellows but also their leadership abilities. Benefits to fellows include instruction leading to a practical understanding of municipal government, professional development through mentoring and networking, and potential employment with leading Internet companies. Fellows will work with civic and industry leaders for 11 months. The applications developed, which should be lightweight, cost-effective, efficient, and scalable, will be made available to other local governments.

In this first iteration of Code for America, four cities—Boston, Massachusetts; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Seattle, Washington—were chosen through a competitive process from dozens of cities that applied to the program. Each city has partnered with a team of fellows to address a specific project.

- In Boston, the city's educational services will be able to engage students via a web platform that could provide suggested readings for homework assignments, let students discuss their work and participate in contests, and other activities.

- Washington, D.C., will create a manual that will assist other local governments in conducting open data programs like the district's own Apps for Democracy contest.
 - Helping its citizens collaborate on activities related to neighborhood services is the goal of the Philadelphia project.
 - Collaboration is also the theme of Seattle's project, which is seeking a mechanism for enabling communities to work more effectively with each other and public safety officials.
- Esri is supporting Code for America with software and training and advising fellows in all four participating cities.

As the work of Code for America 2011 goes forward, the organization is seeking more local governments to work with the next cohort of fellows in developing solutions to problems that are common across jurisdictions.

Web technologists interested in applying for the 2012 program should visit codeforamerica.org and begin the process now to meet the application deadlines. The program provides a unique opportunity for people who have the skills and passion to contribute to a new approach to solving the problems of local government. As Caterina Fake, cofounder of Flickr and Hunch, has observed, Code for America provides a way of "doing good while you are doing something you are really good at."