

Applied brainpower

By D.C. Denison

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On a Friday in the middle of February, Michael Hughes, director of the Boston Public Schools Transportation Department, met with seven visiting fellows from Code for America, a new nonprofit organization that matches teams of young technologists with city governments for 11 months at a time.

“They were coming up with ideas even before they got through the door,” he recalled.

The computer program developers, who are in the midst of their nearly yearlong commitment to help the city better communicate with residents, wanted to explore improvements in the ways parents track their children’s school buses.

After brainstorming with Hughes, the team repaired to its space in Boston City Hall. By Monday morning, it had developed the prototype for a bus-tracking iPhone app for parents called “Where’s My Bus?”

“These kids are amazingly quick, and very excitable,” Hughes said.

Now in its first year of operation, Code for America is a kind of City Year for techies. The team of seven developers assigned to Boston will live and work in San Francisco; but first, the members spent the month of February canvassing city government, looking for problems to solve.

The meeting with Hughes was one of 113 interviews the team had with city agencies and officials.

After a month of data gathering, the team is still sorting out exactly what products and services it will build for Boston. Contributions could range from online databases to mobile phone apps. The young programmers, many of whom turned down high-paying technology jobs to work for Code for America’s \$35,000 stipend, want to use technology to improve how Boston is run.

“Up till now, there really hasn’t been a way for computer coders to give back,” said Erik Michaels-Ober, a Boston Code for America fellow. “Teachers have Teach for America, physicians have Doctors without Borders. This is our opportunity.”

Five cities are hosting young developers from Code for America. Each host city, including Boston, contributed \$225,000 to the nonprofit to sponsor a team. That entitles the city to whatever technology is developed.

For its inaugural effort, the organization sent teams to Boston; Boulder, Colo.; the District of Columbia; Philadelphia; and Seattle.

Code for America also receives significant funding from technology companies such as Microsoft Corp., Google Inc., and O’Reilly Media Inc., as well as the Knight Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and Omidyar Network, established by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar.

“It’s an incredible deal for Boston,” said Bill Oates, the city’s chief information officer. “Seven energetic technologists for a year: That kind of talent should cost four times that amount, at least.”

Last week, the Code for America fellows made a presentation at the Parkman House, the historic Beacon Hill mansion, to show just what they could give to the city. On a portable screen set up next to an antique china cabinet, the young programmers took turns presenting ideas to 30 City Hall staffers and representatives from city agencies.