

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.

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The first project: to create an online platform that facilitates communication between the city's 56,000 public school students, their parents, their teachers, the many after-school programs, and school administrators.

"The original idea is that we can help connect the many overlapping ways that the entire school community communicates," said Max Ogden, a fellow from Portland, Ore.

The program is designed to incorporate smaller initiatives and unexpected events. Like snow.

Four of the seven fellows are from the West Coast. After working a shift on the city's 24-hour telephone help line during one of the early February storms, a few of the fellows were inspired to start work on an Adopt a Hydrant iPhone application for Boston that would allow residents to help firefighters by agreeing to shovel out nearby fire hydrants after snowstorms.

Melissa Dodd, chief information officer for the Boston Public Schools, was one of the many city officials interviewed by the Code for America team.

"The cool thing is that they are thinking about problems we think about every day, but just haven't been able to get to," she said. "They don't have to deal with the day-to-day technology issues we deal with, so they will be able to solely focus on the issues they've identified."

Although final products are not due until November, City Hall is expecting to see early versions of the group's work within a few months.

"We'll start seeing alpha products as soon as April," said Chris Osgood, a technology adviser to Mayor Thomas M. Menino who worked with the team members during their stay in Boston. "I expect we'll see some kind of platform that will help pull information together from a variety of platforms, and at least one app for each of the groups they talked to: parents, teachers, students, and administrators."

But Karla Macedo, a Code for America fellow from California, said the number of apps is likely to be much higher than that.

"We'll probably end up creating dozens of apps," she said. "We can bang out an app a day."

Macedo added that once the group gets settled in California, the challenge won't be productivity, it will be priority.

"Our problem won't be what we can do," she said, "but what we will do first."

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