

Code for America Works to Help Cities Solve Problems

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Alissa Black is city program director of Code for America, a nonprofit organization of civic and tech leaders. Appointed in 2007, Black works closely with partner cities to understand their problems and determine how the organization can help them find solutions. Having served municipal governments for more than six years, Black has insight into issues citizens face, such as an inability to access government services.

In tough economic times, cities want to approach their problems differently — can you speak to that?

Cities are used to a formal, regimented process of creating an RFP to solve a problem and reaching out to vendors that have a pre-built solution. Code for America brings a group of fellows with a start-up mentality and culture. We demonstrate new techniques and tools to approach future problems differently. When our fellows were in their cities in February, a lot of what they did was build connections between city staff, community groups and local developers. Jeff Friedman [chief of staff for Philadelphia's Division of Technology] told me that we were like mysterious strangers who came and taught his city's staff that they had the magic in them all along.

What are some of the innovative things you're seeing with the 2011 fellowships?

Kim Rice [assistant COO of Boston Public Schools] had said transportation was a huge problem. Parents had to call a hotline to get information about where their child's bus was. Kids could travel on buses for 30 minutes to get to their schools — and that's compounded when you have snow. Our fellows were able to get access from three different data sets to build an app for parents to give them real-time information about where their child's bus is. [This project is still in development, and the city is looking into the feasibility of such an app.]

After the 11-month fellowship is up, does your partnership with the city end?

We build a kind of network for them while we're in their cities and engaged with the community. Then they remain a part of the Code for America network where they can collaborate and share with our future cities. All cities are beneficiaries of the work we're doing with these four cities [Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle and Washington, D.C.] because the projects will go into Civic Commons to be implemented in any U.S. city.

What do you seek in potential partner cities?

When we're viewing them for our program, we ask, "Is this a problem we've heard about in other cities?" Because we want the solution that we provide to be reusable so that other cities will benefit.

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