

Code for America: Hacking City Government, Not Just Apps



U.S. CTO Todd Park at the 2012 Code for America Summit in San Francisco.

I spent this past week at the second annual [Code for America Summit](#), a showcase for [Code for America](#) 2012 projects and a meeting of the minds for the [Gov 2.0](#) community.

Code for America has been getting a lot of well-deserved press this past year, in part because of the amazing work they've done in just two years and also because of founder, [Jen Pahlka's](#) fantastic [TED talk](#). My colleague, [Rebecca Petzel](#), had the pleasure of facilitating a strategy workshop for them last year, and it's been amazing to see how well they've executed. They have grown beyond their successful [fellowship program](#), adding a volunteer ["brigade"](#) and a [startup accelerator](#). There were 250 participants at this year's Summit, three times larger than [last year](#), but the strong sense of community and shared purpose remained remarkably intact.

I loved hearing person after person at the Summit describe the “Code for America Effect.” On its surface, Code for America is about building innovative software and mobile apps for city governments. It’s easy to fixate on this, because – like most technology – apps are shiny, cool, and sometimes even useful. But that’s not the point.

What Code for America is actually about is *transforming government*, making cities realize what’s possible when government is transparent and actively engaged with its citizens. And it’s about transforming all of us as well, reminding us that government (when done right) is a platform that empowers us to take ownership of our own communities and to make them better.

The moment that best personified this for me at the Summit was Detroit’s Karla Henderson’s presentation on the [fellows’ work in her city](#). Karla was the city liaison for the Detroit fellows this past year. When she was first introduced to the idea of hosting fellows this past year, her reaction was, “I do not need another fellows program. I do not need to baby-sit some people coming to Detroit. We’re up to here with all the help and people wanting to save Detroit.”

Watch the video below to see how her feelings on the program shifted, and why. Listen to the words, but more importantly, watch the emotion on her face. Toward the end of the video, watch her literally light up the room with her smile, as she says, “This is probably one of the most wonderful projects I’ve worked on in my career. I’m so proud of the work that the fellows did.”

That’s what the “Code for America Effect” is all about.