

# Peace Corps For Geeks

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# TIME

By Bryan Walsh

The Gumbo is great, and the nightlife is even better, but let's face it: no one is ever going to mistake New Orleans for a tech hub. But that's exactly why Amir Reavis-Bey knew he could make a difference in the Crescent City. In 2012, Reavis-Bey left a well-paying job as an investment-banking technologist in New York City to join Code for America, a fledgling non-profit group that puts civic-minded techies to work in city governments around the country. He felt some culture shock at first--the tech infrastructure "was very different than in New York, to say the least," he notes--but before long, Reavis-Bey and his three fellow team members figured out how to use their digital know-how to make a mark on New Orleans. After a monthlong survey of residents and officials, they focused on the problem of urban blight: the damaged and abandoned properties that afflict large portions of New Orleans. Over their year of service, the Code for America fellows built BlightStatus, an app that uses city data to allow residents to instantly find out the status of properties in their neighborhoods and helps officials keep on top of the spread of blight. "We were able to solve a problem that citizens brought to us," says Reavis-Bey. "This was a huge chance to make an impact."

That kind of impact--using digital tools to make a real-world difference--is exactly why Jennifer Pahlka founded Code for America several years ago. After nearly a decade of organizing Web- and game-development conferences, Pahlka was searching for her next project in 2009 when she had a conversation with Andrew Greenhill, then the chief of staff for the mayor's

office in Tucson, Ariz. The tech world's focus had turned to Washington--it was energized by Barack Obama's innovative campaign--but Greenhill told Pahlka it was local governments that really needed help. Municipalities sit on vast amounts of data--think of all the paperwork an urban bureaucracy can create--but lacked the technical expertise and the money to make it accessible and usable. Meanwhile, smartphone-enabled citizens were increasingly expecting city services to be delivered by the Web. "It was a moment where you could see what the principles and the values of the Web could offer government," Pahlka says.

## Government 2.0

Code for America brings those values and skills to government service. Programs like Teach for America and the Peace Corps recruit smart college graduates into education and economic-development work, but there were few ways to channel young people with a tech background into public service--even though digital skills are becoming more and more important at every level of government. Pahlka wanted to build a similar model for tech but wasn't sure if it would work. With Silicon Valley companies throwing money and perks at the best engineers, would techies be willing to take a year off from the private sector to work at not much above minimum wage? (Code for America fellows receive a \$35,000 stipend.) "I was very worried that it would be a tough sell," she says.

She needn't have been. In 2011, the program's first year, Code for America received 360 applicants for just 20 spots. It turned out that there was no shortage of coders, engineers and designers out there who were looking for a chance to use their extremely valuable skills for something bigger than the next hot mobile-gaming app. (It also helps that most of the fellows were already fairly-well-compensated professionals.) By 2013, the

program had grown to include 28 fellows operating in 10 cities, ranging from Oakland, Calif., to New York City. In February it received a \$5 million donation from the Knight Foundation. "It's such a neat way to learn how cities work," says Ariel Kennan, a designer who is now working on the Kansas City, Mo., team. "I never thought I would work with the government, but it's been really inspiring."

Once they've had about a month of training--mostly to prepare them for the culture shock of moving from Silicon Valley to city hall--the fellows are dispatched to work in their chosen cities, which themselves have to apply to earn a spot in the Code for America program. The work is meant to go deeper than just improving a city's official website or putting the mayor on Twitter. City governments generate a vast amount of data, everything from bus routes to property-tax records to police reports, but much of that information tends to molder away in archives, untouched except by those motivated citizens willing to make public-records requests. Code for America, which is part of a broader movement to improve the way governments function, aims to liberate that information and find creative ways to use it--and to do so inexpensively. With municipalities under increasing financial pressure from a combination of sagging tax revenue and federal spending cuts, that's a powerful draw for city officials. "We can no longer do things in the old way," says Karen Boyd, communications director for Oakland, who notes that the city has seen staffing reduced by 25% over the past 10 years. "Technology is moving in a new direction, and government needs to move that way too."

In Oakland, Code for America is helping create a Web-based outlet for public records and an online public tracking system for city procurement spending. Cris Cristina, a former design manager at Cisco and an Oakland resident for more than five years, notes that the city government has some-

times had an uneasy relationship with its citizens--especially since the violent reaction to the Occupy protests in 2011. For Cristina, his work as a Code for America fellow isn't just about streamlining city services via the Web; it's also about restoring public trust. Before his three-person team even began programming, they spent a month in consultations with citizens and officials, trying to gauge what they wanted and what they needed. "We started with the city staff and went down to people on the street," says Cristina. "There's a level of transparency that the public is looking for, and that's what we're trying to provide."

## Dot Give

Technology alone won't fix America's cities. You may be able to design an app to track blighted buildings, but you'll need more than software to repair them. Still, the success of Code for America demonstrates the latent desire among some young techies, who are usually assumed to be too rich and busy to do volunteer work, to do something for their communities. "You can walk by your neighbor and ignore their problems, or you can build an app to help them," says Reavis-Bey. "You just need to be a person interested in improving the city where they live."

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