D.C. Takes an Open Data Approach to Muni Code

Jason Shueh | March 19, 2014

Knowledge of the law may be a fundamental requirement for citizens in the United States, but this doesn't always equal easy access to municipal codes for citizens.

The OpenGov Foundation, a non-profit group supporting government transparency, is trying to change that. The foundation today announced the launch of a new open data platform called DC Decoded, a free platform that acts as an open data portal and a one-stop shop for all laws within the District's municipal code.

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A number of states and localities place a copyright on the actual published copy of their laws, and also outsource the code's upkeep to a private company. For instance, American Legal Publishing Corp. offers printed and CD-ROM copies of municipal code for a number of cities at prices ranging from the low hundreds to nearly $1,000 per set.

DC Decoded is the latest of seven legislation data portals launched by the OpenGov Foundation so far. Funding comes from the Knight Foundation, which gave the organization a $200,000 grant for multiple open data and transparency initiatives.

Kraft said the new platform's goal is to break down the barriers preventing everyday citizens, business owners and government employees themselves from accessing laws, both established and developing. In many cases, laws posted for free on jurisdiction websites are poorly organized, hard to work with and don't employ modern Web technology.

"That's a huge and massive barrier to a citizen getting into and finding a section of the law that they need," Kraft said.

DC Decoded makes District laws available in bulk download, in text documents, and for developers, through APIs. It is also quick to search and will eventually feature simple summaries of laws to slash through legalese. Laws will be further broken down into searchable sections, topics and tags.

Kraft said his organization worked with the Washington, D.C. Board of Ethics and Accountability's Office of Open Government on the project. In a prepared statement, Traci Hughes, director of the D.C. Office of Open Government, praised the platform as another practical tool for citizen engagement and democratic process.

"DCdecoded.org is a necessary resource for District residents…g reater access will inevitably lead to more people becoming engaged with our lawmakers and the legislative process – and that is open government at its best," said Hughes.

DC Decoded and the America Decoded network — a network of open data legal platforms — stem from the API and open-source software program called The State Decoded, developed by the Open Data Institute's U.S. Director Waldo Jaquith in 2010. The America Decoded network has expanded to include the legal codes of the states of Maryland, Virginia, and Florida, in addition to municipal laws of Baltimore, San Francisco, Philadelphia and Chicago.

http://www.govtech.com/DC-Takes-an-Open-Data-Approach-to-Muni-Code.html