

## How 'Code for Asheville' has Changed the City's Civic Coding Dynamic

Adam Stone | March 16, 2017



Code for Asheville is taking civic coding to a new level, laying out a novel approach for cities to consider as they seek to spark citizen engagement in the technology enterprise. Founded in 2012, the group went to work in the usual way, hosting hackathons around themes such as food, housing or transportation. Good ideas sometimes emerged, but nothing stuck.

“Once the hackathon is done, those things don’t tend to live on. They are good community building exercises, but they don’t produce the product,” said Eric Jackson, a co-captain of Code for Asheville and a digital services architect for the city of Asheville, N.C.

Civic coding is a hot space, with groups like [Code for America](#), [Crisis Commons](#) and [CityCamp](#) mobilizing thousands of volunteer technologists in an effort to enhance data-driven government. So Code for Asheville’s breakthrough could have implications for cities nationwide.

Simply put, organizers decided that rather than lead the effort, they would do better to follow. Instead of hosting events, they would engage with civic groups on their own turf,

attending meetings and listening to the kinds of problems community leaders actually were facing. Then they'd build their tech solutions around what they had heard.

This new approach has changed the city's civic coding dynamic. Code for Asheville's core of 20 to 30 volunteer coders now work in close tandem with community organizations to address specific, tangible needs.

"We started by sending out emails to community leaders, just to be clear that it was OK for us to be attending their meetings, and most of them were really excited to hear from us," said co-captain Jesse Michel, and co-owner of local Web firm PRC Applications. "We didn't really have a plan so much as we wanted to just soak it all in, to familiarize ourselves with the movers and shakers."

Out of that familiarity has grown a number of new initiatives.

At the Asheville-Buncombe Homeless Coalition, for example, organizers heard about the problem of ex-convicts trying to re-enter society. That hadn't been on their radar, but it sounded like a problem they could help tackle.

"There wasn't really a good place for people to go to for information. It's about which temporary housing program will accept people with a particular criminal history. It involves resources around education. It's about the benefits they can or cannot apply for," Jackson said. In short: a data problem, just the kind of thing the technologists know how to handle.

"It's not very fancy technology," Jackson said. The volunteers created a WordPress site, [www.buncombereentryhub.org](http://www.buncombereentryhub.org), with help from the United Way. Now all 200 organizations that make up the homeless coalition have ready access to this information, and the team is working with coders in Greensboro, N.C., to adapt the site for statewide use.

In their newly forged outreach mode, the volunteers have made headway with a number of groups, including a local Economic Justice Workgroup, advocacy group Voices on Transportation Equality, the NAACP's Racial Justice Coalition, and [BeLoved House](#), which works on poverty and homelessness issues.

In listening to the organizers at BeLoved House, the tech team heard a narrative around access. "Right now if you are homeless or don't have stable housing, your only option is to go to the library where they have caps on how long you can use the computer," Michel said. "They want to create a more inclusive atmosphere so that people can do the things that are required to be a participating member of society: To fill out job applications, to connect with family through social media, to do research on various government services."

The Code for Asheville team took the mission to heart. They solicited donated hardware, cleaned out the operating systems and produced an inventory of refurbished PCs. Ultimately these could be used not just for access but also to train people on basic computer competencies. "The goal is to give these at-risk individuals the tech skills they need for long-term economic success," Michel said.

The community-engagement approach has led to a number of other initiatives, including a data project around Census Tract 9, a traditionally poor African-American neighborhood. Coders are building up a database to explore whether businesses here are getting their fair share of government contracts.

“There has been a significant disparity in how much work has been awarded to black-owned businesses, so we want to look at data around the public bidding process as one way of understanding that community,” Michel said. “We know there are cases where the quotas around ‘minority-owned businesses’ are going to white female-owned businesses where her name is on the title but the husband really runs the business.”

These aren't the kinds of topics the coders would have thought to tackle on their own.

By setting aside the hackathons and venturing out into the community, they say, they have tapped a new and deeper understanding of how civic technology can make a difference. In fact, organizers say they were surprised to discover that many in the nonprofit world already have an eye on data as a possible solution to their issues.

“These community groups had a really good handle on the necessity of data when formulating a strong argument for change,” Michel said. “Several of them had even made their own public data requests and had had trouble getting what they needed. They knew what data they were looking for and they knew what kind of report they wanted to produce with it.”

At the same time, these players at ground level have a solid appreciation for the specific ways in which that data can be used to drive social change.

“Now that we are letting the experts lead, we are able to do work that has a positive impact very quickly,” Jackson said. “These people know what their problems are. They live and breathe these issues every day. That means we can make a difference much more quickly and more effectively.”

<http://www.govtech.com/civic/How-Code-for-Asheville-has-Changed-the-Citys-Civic-Coding-Dynamic.html>