A Peace Corps for Civic-Minded Geeks

How young techies are saving cities time, money—even lives

By HOLLY FINN

At least one hurricane expert put the odds of a mandatory evacuation of Tampa during the Republican convention at a reassuring 0.2%. Tropical Storm Isaac could pass right by. But that doesn’t mean no bluster. And there will be even more of it at the Democratic convention. In the next few weeks there’s no avoiding partisan froth. If we want our civic spirit genuinely cheered, we’ll have to look away from the four men in rolled-up shirt sleeves and focus closer to home.

So-called Government 2.0, tapping online power to tackle offline problems from city hall on up, is an underappreciated, and still revolutionary, idea. Also, it seems to work. Take the new nonprofit Code for America (CfA), a kind of Peace Corps for geeks. This Gov 2.0 standout handpicks a team of sprightly tech stars each year to give up their lives and jobs for 12 months, offer their services to local governments nationwide and bring the Web to the wide-eyed. This year there are 26 fellows for eight cities, and 550 have applied for the 25 to 30 spots next year. Average age: 28.

Surely, their youthful idealism will get chewed up and spat out by the bureaucracy, right? Well, maybe not. These young folks aren’t just writing the code, they seem to be cracking it.

In Boston, snowed-in fire hydrants were a safety hazard. So CfA coded a gamelike Web app inviting locals to adopt hydrants and keep them clear for firefighters. That app went viral: CfA adapted it for Honolulu’s tsunami warning sirens (which require battery checks), Seattle’s clogged storm drains and Chicago’s snow-piled sidewalks. It’s irritatingly obvious, really: Shared technology saves time, money, even lives.
CfA fellows have designed more than 35 apps, for everything from urban blight to school buses. In New Orleans, they coded a system to more accurately sort the backlog of properties for demolition. In Santa Cruz, Calif., they’re streamlining the application process to open a business. The group runs an Accelerator for civic start-ups. Its work presses governments to make information more visible (530 data sets liberated) and helps communities to mobilize (write-a-thons with 2,500 people). Textizen, a citizen feedback app built this year, has already been repurposed in three cities.

Government spending on information technology in 2012 is set at $79.5 billion federally and $55.4 billion for state and local. Meanwhile, to complete one government project—estimated at two years and $2 million—it took a couple of CfA fellows just 2½ months.

Here's the trick: CfA fellows are based in an airy warehouse in San Francisco. They bond with each other, not with local bigwigs. "Coding sprints, design sprints, they're with us," says Jennifer Pahlka, CfA's founder and executive director. Then, when they fan out to do five-week research residencies within city governments across the country, they act less like sufferers from Stockholm syndrome than a stealth team of computer-savvy SEALs.

"It used to be hard to do something. You couldn't put up a website in a day," says Ms. Pahlka—but now anything's possible. Speed and ingeniousness aren't optional anymore. While a paltry third of us feel good about our federal government today—that's the lowest number in 15 years, according to Pew Research—we are still positive about democracy at the state and local level. And rightly so. It is where the scrappy stuff is happening.

But beyond bringing online efficiency to offline civics, is there more to learn from these Millennial brainiacs? "People underestimate how differently they think about the government," Ms. Pahlka says. Opaque is out. Openness is the next generation's default setting when they're up against big problems.

And their attitude isn't just easygoing; it gets results. During a recent negotiation with sponsors—CfA is supported by the Knight Foundation and O'Reilly Media, among others—Ms. Pahlka was feeling stymied, when a couple of young fellows strolled in.

"You haven't put all your cards on the table, you haven't given them the full picture," they said. "Be entirely transparent and see what happens." She did, and it worked. Startling candor can be as invaluable as technological agility—at every age. If not in every election.