Jennifer Pahlka, founder of Code for America, talks 'civic hacking'

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Jennifer Pahlka captains a brigade of 16,000 volunteer programmers who are using technology to make government better, one city at a time.

Nearly six years after she founded nonprofit Code for America to improve clunky government websites, Pahlka has left a trail of civic innovation that reaches from Oakland City Hall in California to the White House, where she helped build the U.S. Digital Service, an elite new technologist team for the federal government.

Her group also helped spark the "civic hacking" movement, in which residents gather to use public data and code to solve community problems.

Pahlka sat down for an interview recently in the old brick San Francisco leather factory where her organization is now recruiting its latest crop of paid fellows to work on civic tech projects around the country. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What's driving the civic hacking boom in places such as the Bay Area?

A: There's still a really strong set of values in the Bay Area that say: "Hey, the tech industry has created a lot of value and wealth, but there are people who've been left behind." A lot of the work we're doing is asking why it's so easy to get lunch delivered in literally 10 minutes here, and yet we spend $80 billion a year on food stamps programs, and to

sign up online there are over 50 screens, hundreds of questions, an interview, and then you'll get enrolled and you'll fall off.

The gulf between the user experience of somebody using a service like that and what we can get on our phones is huge. A lot of people sense that we must close that gap to live in a society that matches our values. Another reason is that the opening of government data, for a lot of geeks, it's like kids in a candy store who say, "Let's play with this data and see what happens." It's fantastic.

Q: How was it that local government fell so far behind in the digital revolution?

A: Not just local government, but government in general has lagged. A lot has to do with what we the people have insisted government be. We've asked government to be very careful with how it spends our money, to not take risks, to check a lot of boxes, and to make decisions for a very long time frame. We've also made government make fairness the top thing. That's a great value, but what it results in, at an operational level, are compliance processes like procurement that have to happen in a rigid way. It's not a good fit with how technology is built and bought in 2015. Blaming government is an easy thing to do, but we've made government that way.

Q: We hear so much about venture capital being spent on app makers who are trying to solve the inconveniences of high-income San Franciscans, but you have had successes with fellows who have raised money for civic-minded startups. How are they able to do that?

A: When I first started, venture capitalists were not very interested in government for the reasons one would expect: a lot of paperwork and long sales cycles. But we've shown that it's an enormous market: about $180 billion in federal, state and local. There are so many people in

government looking for new tools. Venture capitalists are much more open. Not only investments from Andreessen Horowitz or SV Angel, but there is now a $23 million fund, the Govtech Fund, dedicated exclusively to government startups. As more high-profile tech people say government is where I can make my biggest mark, we'll see an increased talent pool and increased investment.

Q: What are some examples of Code for America projects that just didn't work?

A: We're pretty proud of our failures. Our first year, we worked in three cities. Boston was thrilled, and those projects are still running. Philadelphia did great as well. A lot of its outcomes were about culture change (such as using text messages instead of town halls to field input in lower-income neighborhoods). But in Seattle, we tried to build a platform for neighborhood civic engagement that didn't work. The team was fantastic, but we learned that the best civic engagement is about specific things, not about general engagement. Now, every project we do very clearly meets a real user need.

Q: How has living in Oakland shaped your work?

A: Living in Oakland became incredibly poignant for me when we started working in Oakland in 2013. When I first moved to the city, there wasn't even an IT director, much less a chief information officer. When our Code for America project - the Open Oakland brigade - connected us with Libby Schaaf (then a city councilwoman, now mayor), we realized we had found a forward-thinking politician who understood civic data and what it means. She championed our project working on open records requests. During Occupy Oakland, there had been thousands of requests for public information. They were not able to respond well - not because they were trying to hide the information, but because they had no way of tracking or fulfilling them. They had a

system in place, an Oracle system, and absolutely no one used it even though it was really expensive.

Q: So what did Open Oakland do?

A: We built something called RecordTrak, which is how most talented startup technologists would solve the problem. It looks great and it's easy to use. Now, about 9,000 records requests have gone through it. It felt wonderful because in Oakland, the relationship between the people and City Hall had been at an all-time low. Not because people were bad, but because of poor tools and bad process. Libby was good at articulating what she thought had happened, that a city staff who were constantly reviled and considered to be incompetent had gone through a process where they felt proud of their success in finding a 21st-century approach. The fellows didn't build a tool for them, they built a tool with them. The city went from feeling embattled to feeling empowered and one of the cool kids. "We do this tech thing well."

When Libby gave a talk about it at our Code for America summit in 2013, I was backstage in tears of joy. I was crying because I didn't ever think that the work I did would have such a big impact on the city I live in.

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Jennifer Pahlka

Job: Founder and executive director of Code for America

Previous position: U.S. deputy chief technology officer

Residence: Oakland, Calif.

Age: 45

Education: Yale University

Family: Lives with daughter and fiance Tim O'Reilly, founder of O'Reilly Media

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Five things about Jennifer Pahlka

-Keeps eight chickens in her Oakland backyard

-Commuted to the White House weekly last year and led the creation of the U.S. Digital Service as the nation's deputy chief technology officer

-Co-founded the East Bay Mini Maker Faire, which attracts 7,000 people each fall

-First job out of college was at Children's Home Society of California, a social services provider

-Ran the Game Developers Conference for eight years

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