Civic Apps Competition Handbook

Want to organize a Civic Apps Competition (CAC) in your city? This practical guide provides best practices for each phase of the process, based largely on the authors’ firsthand experience planning and managing Apps for Metro Chicago (A4MC). You’ll learn everything from setting goals and creating a budget to running the competition and measuring the outcome.

CACs provide software programmers with platforms for building effective apps, using open government data as a way to foster community involvement and make government more transparent. This handbook helps you address serious questions about the process and shows you what’s required for making your competition successful.

- Gain insights from the authors’ survey of 15 CACs in the US and Canada
- Get guidelines for establishing specific goals, and evaluate results with reliable metrics
- Understand major costs involved and build a budget around partners and sponsors
- Determine participation incentives, prize categories, and judging
- Avoid unstructured data by being selective when choosing public datasets
- Learn how the authors handled roadblocks during the A4MC competition
- Discover ways to sustain lasting community interest once the CAC is over

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Ways to ensure this include: addressing procurement regulations head of time, setting up the competition rules so that government staffers can enter the competition (even if not “win”), creating specific hack salons where government staffers meet with civic coders. An idea we had, but did not follow through on, was to create a “winning category” specifically for addressing government-identified problems (e.g., the truck route finder discussed above).

**For-Profit Innovation**

Software developers get hired based on projects and connections. CAC’s can provide a path for student developers and professionals transitioning into the tech field to build out their portfolio and make connections with local developers and firms. That’s why we recommend local judges from the for-profit tech community. Connections and partnerships formed in a CAC can strengthen local technology businesses.

The harder problem is that local civic data in and of itself doesn’t necessarily provide enough juice upon which to build a for-profit business app. Realistically the application would have to scale to other geographies in order to be profitable. SpotHero, which won A4MC, is an example. A platform to connect those who need and those who have parking spaces, SpotHero is a technology that almost certainly needs to scale by using other jurisdictions’ data (and that data is increasingly available) to become profitable. *National* government data such as 401(k) and 403(b) performance, (used by BrightScope to rate retirement plans), gives much more raw material upon which to build private sector business than can any set of local civic data.

The advent of cross-jurisdictional platforms and initiatives such as Code for America’s multi-city Open311 platform (and 311 Labs),¹ and cities.data.gov (an initiative among several municipal Chief Information Officers)² promises to perhaps develop a richer set of data upon which to build private-sector activity with local data. We’re dubbing this “Big Data from the Ground Up.”

We’re excited for a democratic future where more data powers more knowledge. We see the ingredients for this coming from a partnership among civic coders, community leaders, and government staffers. Civic Apps Competitions are a means by which to introduce ourselves.

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¹. [http://codeforamerica.org/category/open311/](http://codeforamerica.org/category/open311/)

². [http://www.data.gov/communities/cities](http://www.data.gov/communities/cities)
About the Authors

Kate Eyler-Werve specializes in helping organizations adapt to disruptive technologies and ideas. When Walmart decided to go green, Kate designed and led campaigns to engage their 1.2 million employees with sustainability. When Mayor Rahm Emanuel decided to make Chicago more transparent, Kate led the launch team for the 2011 Apps for Metro Chicago Competition. She is looking for the next disruptive idea to play with.

Virginia Carlson, Ph.D. is a national figure in the role of information resources and their role in harnessing information for urban revitalization. She has developed and applied her expertise in a variety of settings, including: identifying data sources for the State of Illinois Index of Leading Indicators; constructing economic indicators for redevelopment options in Gorj County, Romania; identifying key data intervention points for federal data as the Deputy Director for Data Policy at the Brookings Institution’s Urban Markets Initiative; and designing the strategic information approach for the campaign to induce The Boeing Company to move its headquarters to Chicago. She is a member of the Board of Directors for the Association of Public Data Users.