Civic Tech and Data Collaborative Demonstration Cities: St. Louis

Civic Tech for Social Impact:

Civic Engagement and Technology for Municipal Court Reform in St. Louis County

The [Civic Tech and Data Collaborative (CTDC)](https://www.livingcities.org/work/civic-tech-and-data-collaborative) is a joint initiative of Living Cities, Code for America and the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP), supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

## Project Overview

At a time when national attention is focused on inequalities in the criminal justice system, [CivTech St. Louis](http://www.civtechstl.com/) aims to empower citizens with tools and data that lead to more effective government, a more engaged community, and a more equitable society.

As one of the CTDC demonstration sites, the project is a partnership initiated by Rise Community Development (NNIP Partner), OpenDataSTL (local Code for America Brigade), and St. Louis City and the local municipal courts (local government) that collaborates with many other stakeholders. Started in December 2015, the project will run through July 2017.

The recent events in Ferguson and the resulting federal investigations have highlighted the disparate impacts of warrants and summonses on low-income people and people of color. Navigation of that system can be challenging, and the compounding consequences of missing court dates, warrants and outstanding fines can be devastating. Federal investigators have discovered how easily the area’s residents, disproportionately poor and people of color, can fall into a circular trap of missed appointments, fines and fees, suspended driving privileges, and even jail time. Citizens without access to credit cards, home internet, smartphones, or personal transportation are particularly vulnerable. By leveraging data and technology in new ways, CivTech St. Louis hopes to promote a more transparent, accountable, citizen-focused justice system, and to rebuild the trust with law enforcement that is essential for a thriving community.

## What’s happening now?

The Civtech St. Louis has been working with the developers who emerged on top from the GlobalHack competition, held in September of 2015. The competition pulled together nearly 250 civic hackers to develop prototypes for technical solutions that would address the problems facing users of the court system. Features include a mobile-friendly ticket search tool, a municipality finder, a community service portal, a text-based response system and information on individual courts, their proceedings, and citizen’s rights. The developer teams are working with Tyler Technologies, the vendor of St. Louis County’s municipal court case management system, St. Louis County, and other municipalities and vendors to connect the system to live data in order to pilot the ticketfinder portal and texting system.

These tools follow the principle of “with, not for.” Partnering with University of Missouri-St. Louis School of Social Work, they have conducted surveys of more than 350 people regarding their experiences with the courts and their use of technology. They have also gathered the perspectives of many court clerks, lawyers, and judges to understand the criminal justice processes and support local government staff that are championing innovation and reform.

## In addition, the St. Louis CTDC is working with the local civic tech ecosystem to provide opportunities that don’t currently exist in St. Louis. These collaborations and partnerships aim to bring diverse stakeholders, universities, government, and community leaders together to engage them in the process to improve the quality of life and access to opportunity for all residents of St. Louis.

## Tech and Data Milestones

**What technology improvements have been identified for this project?**

St. Louis has approximately 85 independent municipal courts within St. Louis City and St. Louis County. Residents are frequently frustrated--and losing valuable time--when they turn up at a court to pay a ticket only to be told they are in the wrong place, and should be in a neighboring municipality. Often, this results in a failure to appear charge in another municipality. Currently, citation numbers include an identification number that is unique to specific courts. Civtech St. Louis can provide a “quick win” early in the grant cycle by creating an open-source tool that allows users to look up information such as court locations , and resolution options based on citation numbers. This tool helps local courts, which do not have easy access to technology or staff to build such a tools, in disseminating key information to residents.

**What data improvements have been identified for this project?**

The St. Louis CTDC project will generate data related to racial equity, public safety and preferred forms of resident engagement that will benefit Rise in their work with Community Development Corporations and other local community-building institutions. Rise will be able to share new indicators built from police stop, warrant and court data and will also have data on whether individuals in different neighborhoods and from different socioeconomic backgrounds choose to engage with the courts systems primarily via text, website, phone, or in-person communication, which will facilitate more strategic community engagement throughout their work.

## About the Partners and Roles

* *Rise Community Development*: NNIP partner, Rise, works to revitalize neighborhoods in Greater St. Louis by bringing together non-profits, financial institutions and government. Rise manages the project, and leads the collaborative in the development and testing of technology.
* *St. Louis Economic Development Partnership*: The St. Louis Economic Development Partnership assists in coordination and communication with local and state government agencies.
* *Municipal Courts*: The Municipal Courts provides the data on the current practices and technology of the justice system.
* *Open Data STL*: Open Data STL is a brigade of Code for America, a volunteer civic innovation organization that assists in the civic user testing group.
* *HandsUpUnited*: HandsUpUnited is a non-profit that works to achieve liberation for Black and Brown people through self-determination coupled with political education. In their partnership with the collaborative, they host the technical training workshop in which students worked on the website design and content.
* *University of Missouri-St. Louis School of Social Work*: The St. Louis School of Social Work is providing in-kind donation through expertise in survey, focus group protocols and students to implement the research.
* *GlobalHack:* Global Hack is working to build a better tech ecosystem through software competitions.In September 2015, it ran the hackathon to create technology solutions to make it easier for people to navigate the criminal justice system and resolve their issues faster.