LOS ANGELES HACKATHON:
Playa Vista, CA April 2017

The Children's Partnership

Background

#HackFosterCareLA was inspired by the first-ever foster care hackathon, held at the White House in May 2016. The Hack Foster Care Coalition identifies foster care hackathons as a way "to use technology to improve the lives of foster youth and families in the child welfare system" by bringing "together tech leaders, child welfare agencies, foster youth and families to develop solutions that make a meaningful difference."

This first-ever hackathon inspired follow-up hackathons and spawned a new partnership between the technology and child welfare sectors that promises to change the experience of foster care in the future. For more information about earlier foster care hackathons, see: Hackathon Report

What Happened at #HackFosterCareLA?

#HackFosterCareLA, held in April 2017, was a multi-stage event designed to bring new thinking to improve the experience of children and youth in foster care in Los Angeles County. It included:

- A youth coding training two week before the main event hosted by TXT: Teens Exploring Technology;

- A full-day Legal Hackathon with participants from County Counsel from multiple Departments as well as others representing different
- parts of the child welfare system and its stakeholders;

- A pre-hackathon "networking" kick-off party with an interactive art show organized by "The Marvelous Whirlwind Project"; and,

- The main event: a two-day foster care hackathon consisting of both technology and policy "hacks" to improve the child welfare system in Los Angeles County.

Participants included former foster youth, tech companies and innovators, officials from state and county agencies, nonprofit service agencies, foster parents, and philanthropists. The diversity of participants, numbering about 200, reflected the wide array of organizers and sponsors recruited by the event organizer, the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative.

The main two-day event blended the traditional sprint-style technology hack with a series of panels that allowed for a "deep dive" into relevant policy and practice issues. Key to the impact of the event was the intensive involvement of County child welfare and technology leadership in the design of the event and in identifying priorities for policy and technology hacking. The County laid out the following **Challenges** for the hackers:

- Service Linkage & Referrals
- Communication
- Recruitment & Retention of Foster Families
- Visitation
- Emancipation Planning

Organizers helped ground these challenges through videos that feature real people who live the foster care experience and who would benefit from real solutions. (Videos are available at: HackFosterCare)

Results:

Some significant results of #HackFosterCareLA are not quantifiable: it inspired participants, generated momentum for change, created relationships between new partners, opened new windows of transparency, and demonstrated the strong commitment of powerful county and elected leaders to this work. Importantly, the event made a clear case for the role technology can play in improving the child welfare experience. In addition, the following concrete results emerged:

- An open data set was developed for the event and used by policy and tech hackers. This development highlights the County's growing efforts to leverage open data to benefit this population.

- The Legal Hackathon led to strong consensus that misperceptions about the law and administrative challenges are a bigger barrier to sharing information to benefit youth in foster care than are actual legal prohibitions. County Counsel from across Departments agreed to work with the Office of Child Protection to continue these conversations and further clarify the opportunities for sharing.

- Two technology companies – CoLab and Sensay -- launched new foster care-related products that were begun at earlier foster care hackathons.

- Finally, and potentially most significantly, the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) made a commitment to "grow" some of the technology prototypes and concepts developed at the event "from seeds into trees". These "seeds" include 10 prototypes developed during the hackathon by 13 technology companies and a "pop up" youth team. Initially, DCFS is focusing on the visitation and transitional planning hacks.

View Tech Hack Presentations
And, the Shared Code

Making the most of this moment: Recommendations for County and State Leaders

Make hackathon thinking the standard in child welfare planning

Hackathons inspire new solutions to seemingly intractable problems through their use of design thinking, inclusion of new voices and partners, and by fostering a can-do spirit among stakeholders. Going forward, California counties and the State should creatively deploy such solution-oriented thinking as a standard practice in child welfare planning to realize the greatest benefits for children and youth in care. In the words of Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who helped kick-off the event: "Let this not be the last time that we innovate with the county on solutions that support the most vulnerable among us."

In fact, hackathon thinking demands that agencies let go of current models and, as technology solutions are developed, seize the opportunity to reengineer business practices. In the words of event organizer Sixto Cancel, Founder and CEO of Think of Us, "We do not do right by our kids if we are not challenging the status quo."

The hackathon experience shows the need to amplify the voices of those with a lived experience – foster youth and foster parents, in particular – to ensure that solutions make a real difference. Solutions cannot be imposed from the "top down," but rather must percolate up from the community that is impacted. To that end, the user-centered design and iterative improvement process that has been successful for technology must also be employed to design policy change and continue to improve upon it. Doing so will offer tens of thousands of children and youth, as well as their families, a chance for a better foster care experience.

Work collaboratively to take the best ideas forward

In order to build on the momentum of foster care hackathons, counties and the State must continue to collaborate to deliver real results for children.

County Leaders:
Should assess the concepts developed during the hackathons against Department priorities and gauge their viability to identify how to proceed. As a project moves forward, leaders will need to learn from and share assets with other hackathon communities to prevent wasted effort and move the field most quickly, and productively, forward. Resources like hackfostercare.org can help make those connections. Getting the best results will take involvement from all sectors and agencies serving this population – heeding the call of Mayor Eric Garcetti, who challenged participants to continue to "break down the silos in this City and County" and "end the social isolation" that harms this population so profoundly.

State Leaders:
Should leverage successful innovations from the hackathons and related county initiatives. This will include promoting the success of efforts that can benefit other communities around the State – especially those that enhance local success in state-driven initiatives such as Continuum of Care Reform -- and helping identify ways to take them to scale. Achieving scale will involve, at a minimum, developing the new Child Welfare Services system to support and interface with such external systems and, in some cases, may even involve incorporating them into the New System itself. State leaders began this work by participating in the California hackathons, but work must continue to make the most of this opportunity.

Conclusion

In the words of Winnie Weschler, Executive Director of the Pritzker Foster Care Initiative, #HackFosterCareLA "is about the community coming together to come up with new solutions." Now, with new ideas and prototypes at our fingertips and new partners who are eager to make a difference, it is incumbent on child welfare leaders and stakeholders to make these solutions happen through continued dialogue, collaboration, innovative thinking and implementation.

ABOUT THE CHILDRENS PARTNERSHIP

The Children's Partnership is a non-profit, advocacy organization that works to improve the lives of children where they live, learn, and play. Since 1993 we have worked to advance the health and wellbeing of underserved children in California and in the country, through meaningful community partnerships, forward-thinking research, and community-informed policy.

Since its inception, TCP has been working to ensure that the benefits of technology reach California's most vulnerable children. This has included working with a number of counties and the State to develop and evaluate electronic processes for sharing critical information about children and youth in foster care among a care team, in order to improve care coordination and service delivery. TCP was also an early leader in efforts to reduce the digital divide. For more information on our foster care-related work, please visit: Children's Partnership Foster Care Coordination.

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