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 A photograph of a diverse group of young children smiling and looking towards the camera.

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FEATURED NEWS

After a Series of Foster Care Hackathons, Here's What Happened Next

by *Devon Ziminski* September 15, 2017
| *Devon Ziminski*

Over the past 18 months, four foster care “hackathons” have explored how technology could be optimized to streamline child welfare systems and better serve youth and families.

During that time, events in Washington, D.C., New York City, the Silicon Valley and Los Angeles have been instrumental in spurring changes to the child welfare systems there.

The hackathon series kicked off in May 2016 at the first-ever White House Foster Care and Technology Hackathon in Washington, D.C. Hosted by the White House, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and foster care non-profit Think



of Us, the two-day event brought together child welfare leaders, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, foster youth and leaders from the technology sector to “hack” the foster care system’s most pressing challenges.

Hackathons – like the foster youth policy and technology hackathons – have spurred a new wave of civic engagement, and these collaborations between the technology and public sector can move the dial on social issues. In an [article](#) featured in the *Review of Policy Research* journal, authors Peter Johnson and Pamela Robinson examine how hackathons, by working with open data and examining government services, can act as a form of civic engagement to spur change.

The most notable outcome from the D.C. event was [an update to the 24-year-old requirements](#) that states have to adhere to when building data systems. The new Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) included some grant funding for states that opt into overhauling the clunky Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (SACWIS). The new regulations are helping California as it dives into a \$441 million overhaul of its current data management system.

In New York, which hosted a similar two-day event in December of 2016, the results are ongoing.

Because of the hackathon, the NYC Administration for Children Services (ACS) is working with nonprofits [New Yorkers for Children](#) and [iFoster](#), as well as with Google, to provide laptops to youth.

In addition, the agency is working to aggregate all the online resources available to foster care agencies, youth and foster parents by the end of the year.

“A development team is working on designing and building an online clearing house to bring together resources from across agencies in a mobile-enabled website for parents, followed by an app after the initial website launch,” said Loren Ganoë,



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chief of staff and chief operations officer of the ACS Division of Family Permanency Services.

After the hackathon, a group of foster youth attended Google's Code Next workshop to gain tech skills. The newly established Office of Employment and Workforce Development Initiatives, spearheaded by Julie Farber, ACS's Deputy Commissioner of Family Permanency Services, is working with Google and other firms for opportunities for foster youth in the tech sector.

Similarly, the Silicon Valley Foster Care Summit led to efforts both inside and outside the child welfare system.

In the lead up to the event, the [Silicon Valley Leadership Group Foundation](#) announced its dedication to making foster youth issues a large part of the upcoming year's agenda. This announcement has manifested itself in various ways, including laptops provided to youth by [iFoster](#) and Google.

The Silicon Valley Children's Fund and Teen Force are also "launching an initiative to rev-up foster parent recruiting through technology," said John Hogan, vice president of career services for Silicon Valley Children's Fund and TeenForce, who served as one of the Silicon Valley Hackathon's co-chairs. The organization used LinkedIn for foster parent recruitment and engaged in direct recruiting through collaborations with technology companies.

In southern California, [#HackFosterCare Los Angeles](#) was a catalyst for the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to address self-sufficiency planning for youth and their caregivers by taking the paper-based Transition to Independent Living Plans online. This will involve creating a more interactive, technology-driven platform through which youth and caregivers can plan for the youths' transitions into adulthood.

And when it comes to the herculean task of ensuring visits between foster children and



biological parents, the department has been [working to develop a user-friendly scheduling app](#).

“When kids are separated from their parents it’s traumatic to be taken away, and we want to maintain their bond,” said Genie Chough, the director of government affairs and legislation at DCFS. “Visits are the best way to maintain bonds and strengthen them.”

Chough is leading a team of private providers to submit input before contracting and developing the scheduling app.

While the hackathons resulted in feasible policy solutions and detailed technology strategies, the events also shifted focus from people working in the child welfare system, like caseworkers, to the youth affected by the system.

“We went into the hackathons thinking case management and the case manager was the end-all be-all when in fact it was not,” said Sixto Cancel, founder and CEO of Think of Us, the primary sponsor of the hackathon series. “No one person can save a youth, you need a network to help, to encourage, to support, to empower.”

The series isn’t over yet.

The next hackathon is scheduled for the weekend of October 28 in Omaha, Nebraska.

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— **Devon Ziminski**

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