



CODE for AMERICA

Headquarters: San Francisco, CA
 Founded: 2009
 Industry: Non-profit

Code for American is the recipient of a UserTesting OneWorld grant. [Learn more](#)

The challenge

When people on community supervision don't get information and support when they need it, they too often end up back in jail

The solution

Launched ClientComm, a web app that allows probation officers (POs) to exchange text messages with clients using any device

The outcome

Pilot program saw an 32 percent improvement in pre-trial success, with 8x increase in monthly communications and 5 hours saved per week per probation officer

Code for America keeps people out of jail by improving outdated communications system

Brings technology and government together to uphold safety and justice in communities

The challenge

Roughly 5 million adults in the US are on community supervision at any given time; this translates to 1 in 53 adults being on probation, parole or pre-trial supervision. Roughly half of those on probation eventually exit each year, and of those 3 out of every 5 exits are deemed successful. The remainder are re-incarcerated or end in some other unsatisfactory outcome.

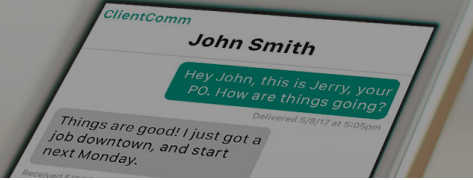
While there are many reasons for these results, one contributing factor is difficulty complying with the many rules required to successfully exit probation. Probationers have on average 10 to 20 different terms that they must comply with. In addition to being difficult to complete, the rules are also largely hidden. "There are a ton of cracks where critical information is falling through," says Manya Scheps, Senior Product Manager at Code for America. "This is because landline and letters are the most up-to-date technologies that many county governments have." Non-compliance can be attributed to something as simple as critical notifications being delivered to the wrong address or getting lost in transit.

Enter Code for America. Launched in 2009, Code for America is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that aims to lessen the gap in technology use between the private and public sector. By employing user-centered design and agile development principles, the group aspires to improve how government uses technology in order to better serve the American public.



How do we expect people to get through the system if they don't even know what the rules are?

—
Manya Scheps,
Senior Product Manager,
Code for America



One of its major mandates is upholding safety and justice in communities by safely reducing over-reliance on incarceration. The Code for America team sought to streamline the communication process, ensuring that critical information gets to individuals participating in community supervision—and in the way they need it in order to be successful.

The solution

The team developed ClientComm, a web app that allows probation officers (POs) to exchange text messages with their clients from their computer, tablet or mobile device. In developing this application, they leveraged UserTesting to optimize the user experience.

1. Easy-to-use solutions for all audiences

“We have users with a wide range of digital literacy and we wanted to be sure we covered everyone’s needs,” notes Rachel Edelman, Product Designer at Code for America. “Our customers (POs) operate in a world where fax machines, phone calls and personal meetings are the main modes of communication. Many have legitimate fears about their ability to adopt new technology. Being able to do usability testing and ensure we were upholding our mandate to provide intuitive, helpful solutions was very important.”

2. User-distant design to maximize resources

While Code for America is based in San Francisco, their customers are spread across the US as far as Baltimore. Being able to quickly and easily secure feedback from customers in order to drive customer-centric design was critical towards positive outcomes. Edelman adds, “There’s only so much we can travel. It’s amazing that I can sit in my office and set up a UserTesting study and get all the results back within 30 minutes. That’s about the amount of time it would take me to take a cab to the airport. It’s an amazing time saver.”

3. Product experiences that match customer needs

The ClientComm interface and its functionality are intentionally simple. “For us, usability was the main focus,” says Edelman. “We just wanted to make sure that people can complete the tasks they need to do in order to do their jobs.” The team included specific features that addressed the unique challenges of the audiences they were working with. For example, probationers often rely on prepaid phones, which means they frequently change their phone numbers. Probation officers are able to quickly edit the phone number associated with a profile and add in notes as needed, ensuring that lines of communication continually remain intact.

Following the trial of ClientComm, the Code for America team observed substantial and replicable results:

32%

Improvement in pre-trial success

5/hrs

hours saved per week per probation officer

8x

increase in monthly communication per client

The outcome

The team piloted the program in Salt Lake County, Utah and the early results already speak to the product's success. The biggest benefit to POs was time savings: on average each probation officer saved more than 5 hours per week. And they saw an 8x increase in communication per client per month.

While increased communication is good, "where the rubber hits the road is in client success," says Scheps. "Whereas in the past, 50 percent of clients on pre-trial supervision weren't showing up for court or had a new arrest under supervision, now less than 20 percent are." They saw an astonishing 32 percent improvement in pre-trial success. The team is currently working with UVA Professor Jennifer Doleac to conduct a randomized control trial to understand precisely how much of that sharp reduction is attributable to ClientComm.

The team continues to expand the program to new regions, extending the impact of ClientComm across the US. And they do not often encounter resistance. "In new jurisdictions, we have people who raise their hands to become beta testers. These are the probation officers who have years of on-the-job experience and understand the benefits of what we are offering," says Scheps. "They have great results and become evangelists within their departments, and share use cases we never thought of."

About Code for America

Founded in 2009, Code for America is a national nonprofit that believes that government can work for the people, by the people in the 21st century, if we all lend a hand. Code for America builds open source technology and organizes a network of people dedicated to making government services simple, effective, and easy to use. By pairing teams of technologists with local governments, Code for America works to redesign core systems and services in health and human services, safety and justice, and economic development. Learn more at www.codeforamerica.org.



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