



Social entrepreneurs solving problems around the world
The coding company widening access to US public services

Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship winner: Jennifer Pahlka, executive director and founder of Code for America
by [Sue George](#)

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From boosting uptake of food stamps to clearing low-level felonies in under a week, Jennifer Pahlka's [Code for America](#) is helping the government to work for the public in the digital age

Although the US government aims to provide services to millions of people at risk of falling into poverty every year, many more still fall into the gaps in the social safety net. They are failing to receive the benefits that they should be able to access. So why - in the digital age - does this happen?

Jennifer Pahlka, executive director and founder of [Code for America](#) (CfA), had been working in games development, and then business-to-business tech events, before she became involved with technology events for the government in 2009.



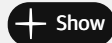
Skoll awardee

Jennifer Pahlka
Founder and executive
director, Code for America



Fact file

Find out more about Code for America and Jennifer Pahlka, founder and executive director



“The contrasts between how those worlds do tech and how government does tech were apparent and frankly shocking to me,” she says. “This is a social justice issue - it’s bigger than governments wasting money - and it [happens] because the programmes are not equipped with reasonably modern technology.”

CfA builds open-source technology in partnership with local governments, making services simpler and easier to use for both the government and the public. It was set up to counter overly complex (and expensive) IT projects that need endless testing and don’t really deliver - something that is all too common across government and public services. CfA, which aims to bring the government into the digital age, allows people to use mobile apps and easy online forms to access some of these essential services.

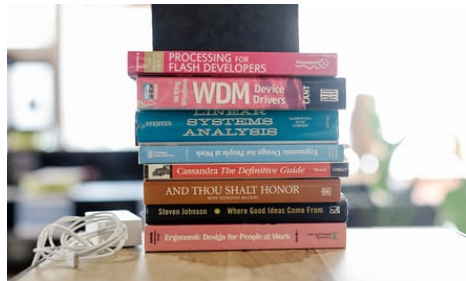


Code for America staff (above) and the San Francisco office (lead image) (All photos by Jason Henry for the Guardian, excluding image of staff above and Dylan below, courtesy of CfA)

It launched its first projects in 2011, using Palkha’s connections in local government and attracting tech specialists driven by the desire to work for the public good. Programmers and designers teamed up with local governments to find simple and effective solutions to improve services. “A couple of cities signed up very enthusiastically the first year, and, because the outcomes were compelling, we were then able to find other people in government to take those risks,” she says.

CfA now concentrates on three general areas - health, criminal justice and workforce development - working with state, local and city governments across the US. It tackles key issues such as low take-up rates for food stamps in certain

states - which was, in part, down to people being required to fill out lengthy forms that, if online, rarely worked on mobile phones. The California state government now uses Cfa's [GetCalFresh](#) app to cover people applying for food assistance, and Cfa estimates a 30% uptake in applications from eligible citizens.



Staff working in the Cfa office in San Francisco (top); books on coding in the office (left); and Cfa stickers (right)

Cfa also provides several criminal justice apps in California. Although low-level offences can be expunged from individuals' records in the state, few people had been able to do this, as the levels of bureaucracy involved appeared overwhelming. This meant they had a black mark against their names when applying for jobs, housing or student loans. The [Clear My Record](#) platform enables users to fill out a short form that reduces lengthy legal processes - which can otherwise take months - to, Cfa estimates, between three and seven days.

Cfa's [ClientComm web app](#), which launched in Salt Lake County, Utah, in 2016, enables people on parole and pre-trial to have better contact with their case managers. This gives them a better chance of staying out of jail, as they are less likely to get sent back for non-violent violations of parole. Salt Lake County internal government reports show significant increases in numbers of people successfully appearing for their court dates and adhering to probation terms.



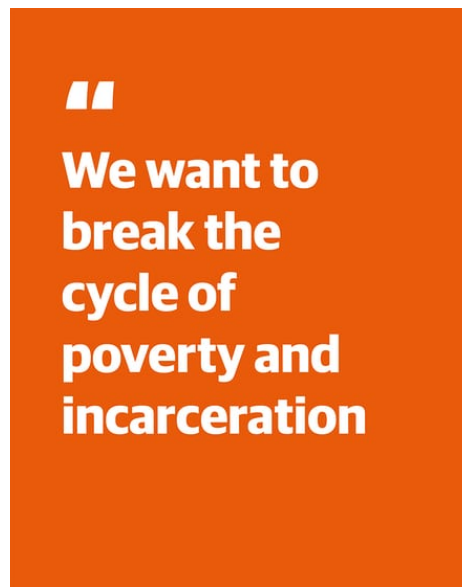


Developer working on coding in the CfA office, San Francisco

“You want to not get people stuck in the system, not be in jail unnecessarily. [There are estimates that 40% of people in jail in the US are not there for any compelling safety reason](#),” Pahlka says.

CfA is now developing its [Integrated Benefits Initiative](#) - a joined-up, human-centred approach to integrated enrolment that will provide better outcomes for some of the most vulnerable, low-income people. If someone uses the ClientComm app to ensure they meet the conditions of their parole, they may also be eligible for food stamps and Medicaid - so why not integrate them all?

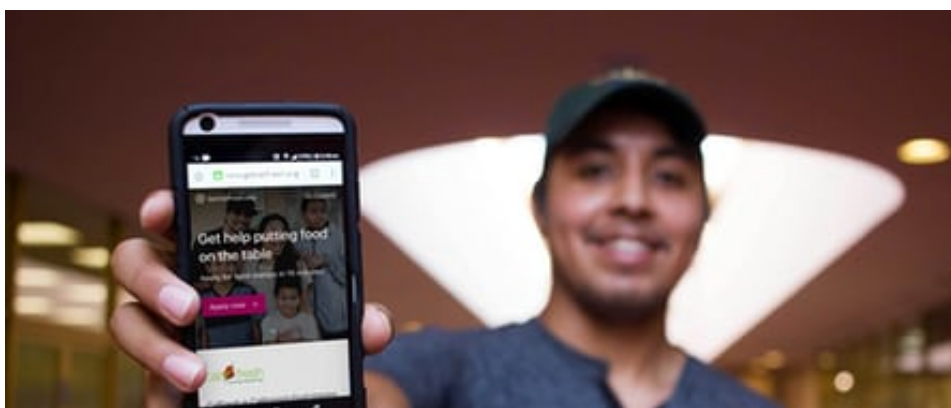
“Government can be massively more effective when you can break across the silos,” she says. “We want to break the cycle of poverty and incarceration.”



The CfA office in San Francisco

CfA estimates its apps reached more than 165,000 people in 2017, helping them to gain access to essential government services. It projects this will rise to 500,000 in 2018.

The company employs around 60 staff, but it also has approximately [63 volunteer chapters, called brigades](#), which, Pahlka estimates, includes around 44,000 tech experts working with local governments. These are people wanting to help bring the principles of CfA to wherever they are in the US, to improve the communities they live in. The chapters operate with some autonomy but with close regard to the CfA principles. “Everyone who wants to be part of this movement should be part of it. The American people are a major stakeholder in this process,” she says.





The GetCalFresh website enables people like Dylan (pictured) to apply for Snap food stamps easily online

Pahlka is looking forward to meeting her fellow Skoll awardees, and seeing how each one's specific expertise can inspire the others. "Everyone says that social entrepreneurship is not for the faint of heart, and this is a community of people who support each other," she says.

These social entrepreneurs will help ensure the government makes the best use of technology, which is vital for the challenges of the 21st century, Pahlka adds: "We want people not to write government off as incompetent. If we could make it even 10% more effective than it is today, that could be a bigger driver of outcomes than doubling all [the country's] charitable spending."

codeforamerica.org

Code for America is building platforms that enable government providers of social services to be more effective: it starts from the consumer, not the provider, and it works back to the problems they need to have solved.

Jude O'Reilley, Skoll Foundation

What are the Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship?

The **Skoll Foundation** was set up in 1999 with the aim of driving large-scale change through investing in, connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs, with the awards taking place annually since 2005. The awards are about "shining a light on what is working in the world" according to president and chief executive Sally Osberg. "We wanted to invest in solutions to the world's most pressing problems. The Skoll Awards are a way for us to do that," she says. "We see entrepreneurs as agents of opportunity, of creative disruption."

Organisations are nominated by Skoll's network of partners, for qualities such as impact potential, collaboration and innovation, and must be led by visionary social entrepreneurs. Each winner gets a \$1.25m three-year core support investment to scale work and increase impact. This year, five of the six awards have been presented to women, something Osberg thinks is significant. "There is a perception that women entrepreneurs either don't exist or don't prevail," she says. "We wanted to see if we could prove that wrong, and I believe we've done that."

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