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Google's GovDev Challenge Provides Real Solutions for Government.

The tech giant's first government hackathon is over, and according to at least one CIO, the event was a great success.

On May 18, Google wrapped up its first GovDev challenge, a 24-hour hackathon that challenged local software developers and entrepreneurs to solve problems facing state agencies in Colorado and Wyoming. More than 100 developers joined with government workers, community groups and organizers in Denver for the event, and when the coding was done, nine teams were awarded cash prizes. Officials said the event was a success because it produced software they may ultimately use in their businesses, it sparked new relationships between government and the public, and it gave their agencies new ideas on how to work.

At the start of the event, three challenges were announced, two for Colorado and one for Wyoming, and teams and individuals selected a challenge and began working.

Wyoming CIO Flint Waters explained to*Government Technology* why his state's challenge was about improving budget transparency: "We wanted to attack an area that had a sustainable and impactful effort toward the citizens' view of government. There's been so much done at the national level, in terms of technological innovation, that has damaged the public's trust, and we needed to do things that worked a little bit different than that. It's really tough to find champions in state government that are meaningful but not necessarily as passionate as data transparency and budget. It's a hard thing to go into the Legislature and get them excited about."

The event was a huge success, Waters said. Each participant was granted ownership of his or her intellectual property, so if the states want to use the solutions, they need to enter negotiations with the team or individual. Waters wouldn't say which winners his agency is interested in, only that it's very interested. "It does have very strong potential for what we're doing," he said. "We do want to be able to pull that data off the back end and see the hard budget numbers."

The hackathon was also a big learning experience for Wyoming's staff members, and Waters said a school-bus load of IT workers from different areas of government attended. "They spent their time watching how this was structured, how this attacked the problems, how this affected their thoughts, how they did their resource gathering," he said. "They learned a huge amount on the collaborative environment that was there onsite, and how they could bring it back and change their workflow – whether they were in networking or servers or systems."

The event gave state representatives an opportunity to meet with local developers, and also to meet some community groups for the first time. "It was really exciting in ways we didn't even imagine. Not in the sense of who coded the fastest or who busted out the slickest interface, so much as about the development and excitement of the community," Waters said.

One of the most impressive projects, Waters said, was the second-place winner for the Wyoming challenge, Dahl Winters, a Colorado-based research and development scientist and software

developer. Winters made WyFi, a data visualization project that condensed the state's budget data into a searchable map and a few simple charts.

Winters said she was amazed that she won a prize at her first hackathon. "I didn't really know what to expect," she said. "I just thought there would be a lot of people coding, and I've never coded for 24 hours straight before so I was really curious what the process would be. I came in with a very open mind." The event was well organized and everyone showed a remarkable willingness to participate, Dahl added.

Kelly Shuster, a Denver-based software developer and member of the first-place winning team for one of the Colorado challenges, said the event was really cool because it was attempting to solve meaningful problems and people were working together and listening to one another, which doesn't happen at all hackathons. "Like every hackathon, I kind of go hoping that I'll learn something new in my field, and I definitely did that but I was surprised at how proud I was coming away," she said. "I didn't expect people running the hackathon, the people from Colorado and Wyoming, to be so pleasant. That was something I took away that I didn't expect — they were so excited about it, they actually did care and it wasn't just a gimmick."

Shuster's team addressed one of the challenges faced by Colorado Disaster Assistance Centers, which are set up after an emergency like the severe flooding that impacted the state last September. "Basically people are required to fill out anywhere from 20 to 30 forms to the different agencies for the different assistance they're going to end up needing, but a lot of the information they're filling out is the same like name, address and phone number. We talked about how not only is that a tedious and inefficient process, but the sociological and emotional impact of having to write your address down 30 times after you just lost your house is pretty terrible," Shuster said. "We were really inspired by that."

When devising a solution, Shuster said it was helpful to have people from government right there to work with. Sometimes the team members had ideas that they found out wouldn't work, but the state workers helped them find a realistic solution.

"I've never participated in a hackathon that had such a real human example," Shuster said. "Maybe it's because there's a lot of talk about the flooding we had in Colorado last September, and I think everyone knew someone who was affected by it. So we're designing for those people that we know, and it sort of brings a more human aspect to the whole thing."

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