Open-Government Activists
Build Accountability at TransparencyCamp

by Zubedah Nanfuka and Nicole Aro

TransparencyCamp is the Sunlight Foundation's annual "unconference"—a BarCamp style gathering for everyone—activists, government officials, reporters, bloggers, technologists, civic hackers* and concerned citizens—to come together and help make a more open, transparent and accountable government. There's no pre-set agenda. Challenges and solutions are essentially crowdsourced—arrived at by participants at the conference.

Sunlight held its fourth TransparencyCamp on April 30 and May 1, 2011 in Washington, DC. More than 250 activists came together to share their knowledge about how best to use new technologies and policies to make our government really work for the people. This year, we focused on showcasing the progress that's being made across the country at all levels of government, and to open up the conversation on what we, as a community, can do to support these new efforts. For the first time, Sunlight also convened 22 open-government advocates from 15 different countries to share their experiences, showing that the open-government movement is both local and global. Jessie Newburn, one of TransparencyCamp's attendees, summed the experience up best:

"It's a growing movement— from the citizens to the residents in places** and for the government to start saying we need to be talking together and working together more. It is a beautiful citizen uprising, but it is not an uprising that says we have come here to destroy or tear you down. It is an uprising that says we have come here to help you be more efficient."

The way citizens can track money in politics was a key topic at TransparencyCamp. In the state campaign-finance-disclosure session, citizens learned that they could use online resources like the National Institute on Money in State Politics (http://www.followthemoney.org/) to track how lobbying money and political contributions play a pivotal role in shaping public policy in their state; and how they can engage with other citizens to hold government accountable through platforms like the Public Insight Network. Want to track government spending? The website "Where does my money go" (http://wheredoesmymoneygo.org/) shows the public where their taxpayer money goes on a daily basis.

TransparencyCamp brings together many different viewpoints to work towards a common goal, but our work for a more open and transparent government neither starts nor ends with a conference. Sunlight works year-round to foster several online communities of passionate open-government advocates, as well as to encourage and support new communities that were created because of TransparencyCamp. We welcome you to get involved.

Some of our most well known communities are:
• Sunlight Labs—a list of over one thousand civic hackers* and software developers.
• The Open House Project started as a project to aggregate information about congressional committees; now it is our policy hub for the open government community.
• Citizens for Open Government—membership is open to anyone who cares about open government or is working to promote transparency, whether it's in their town, state or country.

Another community we're proud to support is CityCamp, whose tagline is "Gov 2.0 goes local." If you missed TransparencyCamp, we strongly encourage people to attend (or organize!) a CityCamp near you. Want to just dip your toes in the water? Try a Meetup: meetup.com/sunlightfoundation.

* Civic hackers—also called "hacktivists"—use technology for the public good. (Ed.)

** Residents in place are residents working together to create a sense of place. (Ed.)

Zubedah Nanfuka is the Grassroot Organizer and Nicole Aro is the Organizing Director at the Sunlight Foundation.

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