The Opportunity Project

2020 Earth Sprints

Participating as a User Advocate

The Opportunity Project (TOP) brings together technologists, government, and communities to rapidly prototype digital products—powered by federal open data—that solve real-world problems for people across the country. To date, TOP's 12-week technology development sprints have catalyzed **over 100 consumer -facing digital products** that leverage open data to address problems like disaster response, youth and veteran homelessness, the opioid crisis, expanding the innovation economy, and more.

How It Works

1 Identify challenges

Federal agencies and national advocacy organizations identify high-priority challenges facing the public.

Team up 2

Tech teams from industry and universities sign on to create data-driven, digital products in collaboration with end users, data and policy experts.

3 Build

Tech teams build products during a 12 week virtual tech development sprint that includes user research, data exploration, and product development. Past products include mapping tools, apps, websites, games, AI algorithms, network visualizations, and more.

Launch 4

Products are launched and showcased at an in-person Demo Day press event in Washington DC.

5   Reach end users

After the sprint, participants work to ensure products reach end users and move the needle on national challenges. Teams have the option to apply for a financial prize to continue their work.

Who's Involved

User Advocates

User advocates are community leaders, local or national advocates, and people with direct lived experience in the target challenges. Past user advocates have represented state and local government, non-profits, service providers, or individual experts. Their role is to guide tech teams in designing solutions that are realistic and useful for the target end users. A user advocate's role includes:

→ Provide insights to tech teams based on their expertise and community connections to shape the products built through the sprint

→ Answer questions on user needs to ensure products solve real problems

→ Provide ongoing feedback to tech teams on their products throughout the sprint

→ Join "milestone" calls (User Research, Concept Pitch, Beta Demo)

→ Attend Demo Day and an optional in-person user engagement workshop if possible

Tech Teams

Tech teams are the companies, universities, non-profits, and students who build digital products in the sprints. They design, develop, and launch the products they build, and typically own and maintain the products after the sprints.

Government

Federal agencies define major challenges facing the public within their mission areas. During the 12-week sprint, policy experts and data stewards from each agency provide feedback to the participating teams and assistance working with federal open data.

Product advisors

Product advisors are technology product experts from outside of government who consult tech teams on how to develop viable products that can be maintained and implemented after the sprint.

What is a User Advocate's Role?

User Advocates (UAs) serve a critical role helping tech teams, federal agencies, and other partners understand the everyday people and communities The Opportunity Project seeks to empower. User Advocates communicate the needs, concerns, and realities of the communities they belong to or work with closely, ensuring that the perspective of end users drives how tech teams solve problems. Being a user advocate can be a very lightweight time commitment. Depending on your availability, you can expect to spend 1-3 hours per week working alongside tech teams and other sprint participants to co-create useful technology for your community.

Why participate?

We've asked past user advocates why they joined TOP and what they gained from the process. Some of the benefits we hear consistently include:

- ✓ **Relationships and partnerships:** Build strategic relationships in government and develop partnerships wit h tech companies and nonprofits

- ✓ **Shape technology available to your community:** Speak on behalf of your community to have a real impact on the challenges that are tackled and the products that are created

✓ **Share your insights:** Contribute to knowledge sharing between tech teams, end users, and federal agencies

Examples of User Advocate Contributions

→ A tech team is brainstorming about what their solution might look like and shares a few ideas. As an expert on your community or stakeholders, you are best able to promote the most promising ideas.

→ A tech team is grappling with a tough, widely misunderstood issue about your community. You share expert knowledge about the problem, leading to a breakthrough and avoiding a critical misunderstanding.

→ A tech team wants to share their prototype with real users. You connect them with end users from your network, helping them gather direct feedback on a potential solution.

→ A tech team is experimenting with the language on their website. You offer guidance on which messages will resonate with your community.

FAQs

What is a User Advocate?

A User Advocate is a sprint participant who is a member of, or works closely with, the target audience of the tools being developed during the sprint (i.e. an "end user" of the products being built by the tech team). They can be service providers, community leaders, organizers, or people with direct lived experience of the problem being addressed.

Why is being a User Advocate important?

User advocates represent invaluable first-hand knowledge about the problem statements focused on during sprints in the Opportunity Project. This knowledge is invaluable because without understanding their end user's real problems, tech teams cannot build meaningful solutions. Having collaborators with direct knowledge of their community's pain points, perspectives, and experiences, allows tech teams to build products that solve real needs, rather than products that are only useful in concept.

Where do I fit into the process?

User Advocates have a role at every stage of the sprint process. At the beginning of the process, you can provide much-needed context for the problem statement to help tech teams better understand the central issues and narrow down their focus.

During the sprints, tech teams may ask you for more information to better understand your community by conducting

interviews, focus groups, workshops, or online surveys. Tech teams may also ask you to connect them to other members of the community you represent to connect with a broader user research base. Throughout the sprint, you will have the opportunity to provide direct feedback on products in development via discussions on Slack and will join in celebrating all sprint milestones!

Once the tech teams have an initial prototype, User Advocates play a critical role in collecting reactions and feedback from their communities either on their own or by connecting tech teams with members of their community to conduct user testing. User testing allows tech teams to know first-hand how useful their product is, what works and doesn't work, and most importantly, what to change for the next iteration.

What kind of feedback do user advocates provide to tech teams?

Anything you want to share will be helpful, but in particular, you may want to focus on your experiences or your community's experiences with the problem statement. As a User Advocate, you have a valuable perspective on a community or stakeholder's experiences that the tech teams want to learn from. When reacting to a prototype, you can share whether you find it useful and why or why not, what works and doesn't work, what you like and why, what you'd change, etc. When interviewing you or asking for feedback, tech teams will prompt you with specific questions; however, any way you can represent an end user's needs and experiences will be helpful.

How often should I interact with the tech teams?

We encourage User Advocates to check in with the tech teams regularly through Slack, email, or any other preferred channel of communication. Since user advocates have a pivotal role in shaping the usefulness of the product, more communication can only result in a better product.

What is the time commitment to be a User Advocate?

Time commitment is up to you and can range during different sprint phases from one to three hours per week. In general, more communication and involvement the better as user advocates have a valuable and pivotal role in shaping the effectiveness of the product.

2020 Timeline

This year, teams will leverage technology and open data to solve challenges related to the **natural and built environment**, such as disaster response, sustainable energy and communities, the blue economy, or others.

Federal agencies have developed problem statements that align with these themes and represent key agency priorities or applications of open data.

Feb - Mar — **Agencies & partners identify high - priority challenges**

Federal agencies identify challenges facing the public and high-value open datasets. Agencies, NGOs, subject matter experts, and advocacy organizations join a roundtable to collaboratively scope problem statements to be addressed in this year's sprints.

April - Jul — **Sprint participants sign on**

Tech teams, user advocates, and government agencies sign on to participate in a sprint.

Jun - Sep — **Sprint #1**

Focused on 3-4 agency-defined problem statements and a total of 10-12 tech teams

Jul - Oct — **Sprint #2**

Focused on 3-4 agency-defined problem statements and a total of 10-12 tech teams

Sep - Nov — **University sprint**

Dec — **Products launched at TOP Demo Day**

JOIN US

Request an informational call.

Learn more at

opportunity.census.gov

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