CIVIC TECHNOLOGY’S ABILITY TO IMPROVE THE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN ST. LOUIS

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In St. Louis, there exists an ambiguity and confusion between the justice system and the citizens it serves. This veil of uncertainty is perpetuated by difficult navigation, unclear processes, sometimes unfair practices, and a lack of effective communication. Additional factors, such as municipal fragmentation, the exploitation of traffic ticket revenue and systemic racism, contribute to a local justice system with a less-than-favorable reputation.

Fragmentation plays a significant—if not leading—role in the region’s cumbersome municipal court system. With 89 municipalities and 81 municipal courts, it’s no wonder. Each of these 81 courts sets its own fines and fees, ordinances, office hours (many part-time), payment methods and legal procedures. The real difficulty, however, is that each court operates as a silo. An infraction in one jurisdiction cannot be addressed in another. Without a central repository of information or any semblance of standardization, only one court can help, leaving 80 that cannot. Frustration, confusion and distrust are the logical responses to such division.

It is not uncommon for metro regions to have a fractured municipal landscape. Missouri is unique in that there are lax minimum standards for municipal incorporation. 500 residents is the minimum population needed to incorporate, with a population of 200 needed to
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Maintain village status. Today, 19 of the 89 municipalities have populations less than 1,000. Many of these small—sometimes micro—municipalities simply do not have the resources to provide the services to effectively or efficiently serve their residents.

Compounding the distrust these shortcomings breed, is the exploitation of traffic ticket revenue. Population loss and eroding tax bases have prompted the reliance on this form of revenue. So much so that in 2015, the Missouri Legislature passed Senate Bill 5, prohibiting municipalities from collecting more than 10 percent of their general revenue from traffic violations.

For too long, too many St. Louisans—particularly people of color and marginalized populations—have faced a disproportionate hurdle within the justice system. Although this hurdle cannot be reduced to traffic violations alone, there is convincing data revealing this group’s unreasonable and unequal accumulation of heavy fines and even jail time for relatively minor traffic infractions. As a result, the cycle of fines, fees and legal debt can easily escalate, particularly for those who lack funds, basic court-related information or sufficient legal advice.

While not unique to St. Louis, this national issue has been the topic of public debate, particularly since 2014 following a tragedy that shook a city and nation.

In August 2014, the streets of Ferguson, and the larger St. Louis area, broke out in civil unrest following the police shooting of Michael Brown Jr., an African American teenager. As a result, St. Louis became the epicenter for national media as protesters held demonstrations for 400+ consecutive days.

Response was warranted and overdue. While hurdles in the judicial system are a daily reality for some, this series of events opened the eyes of many others, igniting a sense of urgency to address such inequities in the St. Louis Region.
Civic technology is a growing movement amongst computer developers, in which innovation and open data are used to solve social and civic challenges. In 2015, CivTech St. Louis took on its first initiative: reduce the jail population by improving the experience low-income people have with the municipal courts by using data and technology.

Later that year, CivTech St. Louis enlisted GlobalHack, a St. Louis-based organization that builds software solutions through programming competitions (aka hackathons). **During the three-day competition, 235 hackers built 44 prototypes.** The winning technology became the prototypes for YourSTLCourts.

In May 2017, CivTech St. Louis piloted YourSTLCourts.com in unincorporated St. Louis County. In 2018, an additional court software vendor (REJIS) was added, allowing over 40 municipalities to be represented, including the City of St. Louis. Close to 75% of the city / county area lives in a municipality served by YourSTLCourts.

On a national stage, Boston and Washington D.C. also looked to technology to address civic issues in challenges related to youth employment and housing.

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In 2015, CivTech St. Louis engaged a team of students from the University of Missouri-St. Louis School of Social Work to survey court users. 360 individuals were surveyed one-on-one after they had appeared at municipal traffic court and asked to share their experience. The median age range of those surveyed were 25-34 years old with a near 50/50 split between men and women. 66% identified themselves as African American.

Court users identified three main challenges: disrespect, unaffordable fines and fees, and lack of institutional knowledge. The latter two pose the greatest risk for long-term ramifications. Often, those who cannot pay their fines and fees are jailed, and bench warrants are issued for those who miss their court date. Both situations are not without compounding consequence. Loss of job, income, license, transportation, housing, or custody could be the outcome of detainment. Any combination thereof can prove economically unsurmountable, particularly for vulnerable people.
In addition to one-on-one surveys, students conducted research on the adequacy of municipal websites, looking at information such as: court clerk name and phone number, judge name, the court schedule, online payment system, dress code, address, fine schedule, etc.

Results indicated only 10 of the 81 municipal courts had websites, many of which offered inadequate or outdated information.

St. Louis desperately needed a system that could restore confidence in the justice system and lower the number of persons incarcerated over minor traffic fines in St. Louis County.
Before YourSTLCourts, there was no easy-to-use central repository of court information such as a ticket finder and payment portal. Defendants had to call or visit the courthouse within the municipality of the received citation to obtain information. Lack of transportation, part-time office hours, loss of ticket, or any other “speed bumps” hindered accessibility.

YourSTLCourts connects and funnels multiple court system databases into one web portal, allowing people to retrieve information about their traffic ticket and warrants no matter where in St. Louis County they were received. It also provides information on courts (such as the locations, maps, etc.), what to expect when going to court and legal rights.

The companion text message-based system allows users to receive court reminders via their phone. It also puts all of the web portal information right at their fingertips.

**With a better understanding of their rights and options, St. Louis area court users are empowered to keep minor offenses from escalating unnecessarily, potentially avoiding a costly legal situation, inflated traffic fines or incarceration.**

While a single technology cannot transform the entire judicial system, it can begin to make incremental changes that improve people’s lives on an individual basis. It’s also where organizations like CivTech St. Louis are best equipped to make a difference.
The St. Louis Civic Tech and Data Collaborative (CivTech St. Louis)
www.civtechstl.com

Your STL Courts
www.yourstlcourts.com

Rise Community Development
www.risestl.org

St. Louis County Justice Services
www.stlouisco.com/YourGovernment/JusticeServices

HandsUp United
www.handsupunited.org

LaunchCode
www.launchcode.org

GlobalHack
globalhack.org

University of Missouri, St. Louis’ School of Social Work
www.umsl.edu/~socialwk/

Living Cities
www.livingcities.org

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
www.macfound.org

National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership
www.neighborhoodindicators.org

Code For America
www.codeforamerica.org

Missouri Senate Bill 5 of 2015

Missouri Revised Statutes (2011) TITLE VII CITIES, TOWNS AND VILLAGES Chapter 79 Fourth Class Cities
law.justia.com/codes/missouri/2011/titlevii/chapter79/

CivTech STL’s Open Source Codebase on Github
github.com/CivTechSTL