



# Collaborating to Impact Public Interest Tech

[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) turns professionals into policy advocates.

We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to climate, science to social impact – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society’s most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For civic entrepreneur Jessica Cole, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub Fellowship was one of the “aha moments” that expanded her ability to contribute to her community. Jessica came to the Hub in 2020 with an expertise in civic technology and the desire for new tools to make policy impact. At the Hub, she not only found those tools but also met a tight-knit network, many of whom she would collaborate with to co-found the U.S. Digital Response — a nonprofit enabling the US government to harness public interest tech expertise at scale. Jessica led the USDR as COO and interim CEO, and in 2023 returned to the Hub as Interim Director, helping fellow technologists follow in her footsteps to unlock their policy potential.

## BACKGROUND

Prior to joining the Hub, Jessica was a Fellow with Code for America and the Head of Innovation and Economic Development for the City of Walnut Creek, CA. These experiences honed her skills as a civic technologist and public servant, as she created innovative products and improved service delivery for local governments. However, Jessica sensed a gap in her ability to impact the policies that dictated her projects’ reach.

In 2019, Jessica attended the announcement of the Hub’s inaugural Fellowship cohort to support her friend, software engineer and activist Ginny Fahs. Jessica walked away from the event with a deep feeling that the Fellowship was the perfect venue for the next phase of her policy work. Shortly after, she submitted her application to join the Hub’s 2020 cohort.

*“The Fellowship broadened what I thought was possible when it came to ways to impact and influence policy.”*

Jessica Cole

## IMPACT

Jessica’s Fellowship experience broadened her perception of what she could achieve in the policy space. During the fellowship, she created the “Automated Advocates” project — a set of resources on automated agents to help policymakers remedy the lack of equitable representation in US civil courts for low-income Americans. As she crafted her deliverables, the Hub provided Jessica with opportunities to interact with policymakers and attend dinners with cohort members and technologists she had long admired.

The knowledge and networks from the Fellowship helped Jessica spring into action while co-founding the USDR in 2020 along with fellow Hub alum Raylene Yung and other civic and technology leaders. Beginning as a collaborative volunteer effort to support government responses to the COVID-19 crisis, the USDR has now worked with over 400 partners in over 38 states and territories to build digital resilience and address topics such as election administration and artificial intelligence use in government. Jessica served as both COO and interim CEO of the organization, helping guide the nonprofit as it grew from providing immediate technological assistance into offering policy recommendations to affect long-term change.

Following her work at USDR, Jessica has paid forward her policy training as a Visiting Practitioner at the Public Interest Technology Initiative at Cornell Tech. In late 2023, Jessica stepped in to serve as Interim Director of the Aspen Policy Academy during Director Betsy Cooper’s parental leave. Jessica aptly steered the Hub through a growth spurt, which included running programs for instructors and nonprofits to empower policy changemaking on an organizational level. Jessica’s return to the Hub further cemented her passion for policy entrepreneurship, and she anticipates continuing to bridge the divide between technologists and policymakers.