

As open-data law turns 4, officials, advocates outline plans, challenges



Minerva Tantoco. (Photo by Noam Galai/Getty Images for TechCrunch)

By MIRANDA NEUBAUER 12:56 p.m. | Mar. 7, 2016

City officials and hundreds of civic technologists marked the anniversary of the city's [open-data law](#) with an educational event this weekend at BetaNYC's [School of Data](#) conference, celebrating the work that led to the 2012 law and detailing new efforts to create policy based on its framework.

Among those at the event Saturday — which coincided with a global [Open Data Day](#) celebration — were Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, who spearheaded the law, along with chief technology officer Minerva Tantoco and City Council speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, who noted the Council has passed seven more bills to strengthen it.

Philip Ashlock recalled testifying in support of the open-data law at the time, as open government program manager for the mapping platform OpenPlans. Now, he is the chief architect of the federal [Data.gov](#) platform.

"The open-data policy in New York City ended up really ended up informing the federal open-data policy," he said. "Both the federal and the New York open-data policy influence the world."

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At the event, city officials detailed areas where data-gathering and analysis are already fueling innovation.

Brewer's office showcased the work of the [Civic Innovation Fellowship program](#) in cooperation with BetaNYC, in which CUNY Service Corps students provide technology skills to

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community boards. Early projects have included analyses of parking meters, heating and construction complaints and the local impacts of Superstorm Sandy on heat and hot water complaints.

Deputy chief analytics officer Lindsay Mollineaux discussed how data analysis can be used to summarize buildings information for firefighters, and described challenges in helping the Department of Housing Preservation and Development find an actionable algorithm to help decide where to place construction site monitors.

She said her office aims to take on the role of a "trusted analyst" providing "data therapy" and support. For instance, she said, it's helped a partner agency that had had no data team start one.

"Now, flash forward, we're helping to onboard their very first dedicated data analyst who will be working for the entire agency," she said, adding that the agency had recognized "it's worth putting people on this full-time."

Still, challenges and limitations to the city's open-data law remain.

John Kaehny, executive director of Reinvent Albany and co-chair of the Transparency Working Group, noted that the law was "a little less perfect than hoped for," because while it directs city agencies to make their public data available on the open-data portal by 2018, it does not include a private right of action with the right to sue as an enforcement mechanism.

"Unfortunately, that left us with the option of only 'name and shame' and City Council hearings to put pressure on the agencies to comply with the bill," he said. Without enforcement, he said, "it's aspirational."

Problems with data availability and quality remain, too, he said. Many data sources are accessible only to trusted educational or research partners or through the internal platform Databridge. And outside of the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications and the mayor's office, many agencies don't yet fully appreciate open data's benefits, Kaehny said.

He urged the city to hire a full-time open-data director and a deputy and to spend more on open data, warning that without investment, "this revolution is going to fizzle."

But Kaehny also acknowledged progress, pointing to a full-time staff of five focused on automating agency data, an open-data culture promoted by initiatives like Big Apps competitions and economic development benefits from the likes of real estate and insurance businesses based on open data. Government itself also benefits, he said, thanks to easier internal access to information.

That progress was evident in the format of Saturday's event. With its educational focus, the School of Data conference was a departure from BetaNYC's previous annual events, which were more focused on hackathons.

"The community is more mature. There are institutions that are writing the code," BetaNYC executive director Noel Hidalgo told POLITICO New York. "It's not just us doing it in our backyard. It has institutional adoption."

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Author: **MIRANDA NEUBAUER**

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