Civic User Testing Network Charter

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**CUTgroup Origins:** Civic User Testing group, also known as CUTgroup, originated in Chicago to enable residents to give valuable input throughout the technology discovery and development process, allowing them to have a voice in emerging technology. CUTgroup’s model combines User Experience (UX) testing, civic engagement, and digital skills training to provide a unique perspective for technological solutions. Chicago’s CUTgroup has provided input in over 30 different local user design exercises for civic and government-related products. To read more about the methods and history of the Chicago CUTgroup, see our book.

**Civic User Testing Network:** Based on the original CUTgroup book methodology, many other Civic User Testing groups have started across North America. Chicago’s CUTgroup, currently led by urban solutions accelerator City Tech Collaborative, has trained and supported some of these groups while others have self-started based on the original CUTgroup principles. All groups have worked to expand and grow to best fit the needs of their local civic tech and resident communities. The Civic User Testing Network allows these groups to come together to share resources and develop best practices, building a more robust framework to make local technology more user-friendly, accessible, and relevant.

**Civic User Testing Network Charter:** This Charter serves as a set of founding principles to ensure responsible participation by Civic User Testing group organizers, members, and the cities they serve. We aim to knit the network’s efforts together and declare our shared values and methods. This charter is a living document with a goal to shape and express our common identity. As we continue to grow, learn, and evolve, the Charter will work to capture the evolution of the practice while continuing to serve the Network’s founding principles.

**Stay in Touch:** If you are interested in starting your own Civic User Testing group or if you are interested in contributing to this Charter, please email Meera Raja, the Charter manager and Chicago CUTgroup lead, at Meera.Raja@CityTech.org.
Charter Contributors

Any and all people who run a Civic User Testing group that follows these core missions and values are welcome to help edit this document, suggest new and revised values/commitments, and provide examples for how your Civic User Testing group lives out these values.

Please email Meera Raja at Meera.Raja@CityTech.org for document access.

Contributors:

Chicago, IL: City Tech Collaborative
Cleveland, OH: Neighborhood Connections
Detroit, MI: Data Driven Detroit
Miami, FL: Code for South
Toronto, ON: GRIT Toronto

Any organization agreeing to this Charter is invited to display the following text on your website:

“{organization name} in {city/location} is part of a multi-city Civic User Testing Network. This network strives to adhere to a set of foundational principles to ensure responsible participation by Civic User Testing group organizers, members, and the cities they serve. For more information on our shared values and commitments, as well as other participating organizations, please see our Civic User Testing Network Charter <link to Charter>.”

Our Shared Values and Commitments

“If it doesn’t work for you, it doesn’t work.”
This is the famous founding mantra of CUTgroup Chicago. While not all of us use this exact quote, we believe that residents, no matter their background, ZIP code, or digital skill level, have the ability to make technology and technology-enables solutions in their city better. If the technology isn’t usable for them, it hasn’t yet reached its full potential.

We respect testers and respect their time.
We are committed to compensating testers for their input, time, and attention whenever possible. Note that different Civic User Testing groups, depending on tester preferences and their own resources, can decide what this compensation looks like.

Example:
In the first CUTgroup in Chicago, we gave people $20 for each test they took. We see this not just as a transaction of money for data, but as a signal that we respect residents’ time and effort.
While we know some residents would participate without the money, we believe we attract and capture a wider swath of residents in Cook County by providing these incentives.

We honor data and do not collect data we don’t need.
Though the organizations within the Civic User Testing Network conduct user testing and collect feedback, we commit to never collecting data that isn’t needed or directly relevant to the project or the Civic User Testing group.

Example:
Questions on Chicago’s CUTgroup tests are about the technology being tested or used to collect feedback about the testing process.

We honor the privacy and consent of testers.
We are committed to the privacy of testers and never share personal information. Members of the Civic User Testing Network commit to creating formal privacy policies, sharing them regularly with their testers, providing opt-outs if testers desire and, for each test, providing a new consent form as input is collected.

Example:
Chicago’s CUTgroup follows this institutional privacy policy, shares it regularly with users, and provides users with regular opt-outs. For each test we also provide an additional consent form.

We strive to recruit testers who are representative of the communities we live in and serve.
This means we recruit to reach typically disenfranchised or underrepresented people into the technology building process. That includes people historically on the wrong side of the digital divide.

Example:
In Chicago, we recruited our testers in mostly analog ways. We put flyers in libraries, public commuting centers, and other public spaces across the city. We distributed information at public events, parades, and civic gatherings.

We strive to design tests that are welcoming and accessible.
This means doing our best to accommodate for persons with disabilities and English language learners.

This also means that, when possible, tests should be held in geographically accessible locations (ideally near public transit) and scheduled during a variety of times that suit different lifestyles. We also provide technology for those who might not have it to ensure any community member who wants to participate isn’t excluded.
Examples:
In Chicago, we like to do our tests in libraries. We’ve found that people will travel to parts of the city they’ve never been to before if they are going to a library - a space where many feel welcome. We try and also set up tests toward the end of the workday between 4pm and 8pm and let testers pick the best time slot for them.

In Chicago, in the past, we’ve also conducted remote testing to accommodate testers with disabilities or testers who are home-bound (ex: new mothers).

We don’t ask for feedback when we know changes cannot be made.
This means that we will not ask for community input on tools, processes, or policies where there is no room for change. We are committed to being authentic. We will never ask for community input for the sake of collected community input.

Examples:
In Chicago, we work closely with our testing sources to understand their mission and goals from which they develop a clear scope and set of outputs and outcomes. Testers are only then asked for feedback against the scope of the project.

We keep in touch with testers about the changes made to the tools and processes they have shaped.
Whenever possible, we will follow up with Civic User Testing group participants and let them know how their feedback helped shape the website, tool, or process. As with all civic-building groups, we hope to empower our residents in knowing they have the abilities to shape decisions that govern them.

Example:
In Chicago, we typically follow up by email when the website, app, or tool is launched, describing the improvements that the testers inspired.

We invite technologists into the Civic User Testing process, encouraging them to engage directly with testers.
We encourage clients (aka whoever is building the technology being tested) to be involved in the testing process. This breaks down the unnecessary wall between creators and consumers of technology. Bringing these groups together means (1) demystifying the tech building process for curious testers and (2) putting real names, faces, and stories behind the personas that clients strive to serve.

Example:
In Chicago, we invite clients to our CUTgroup tests. Some clients go above and beyond, requesting to be trained in how to neutrally proctor the CUTgroup test and then actually help gather feedback from their users.
We strive to be collaborative across the Civic User Testing network cities. When possible, we will share stories, lessons, and resources with peer city organizations. We will work together to develop best practices for Civic User Testing - the more we learn from one another, the stronger the model becomes.

Examples:

Chicago has worked with other cities to share lessons and help stand up Civic User Testing groups.

Join the Civic User Testing Network

Interested in building a Civic User Testing group in your community or would like to learn more?

Please contact Meera Raja, the Civic User Testing Network Charter manager and Chicago CUTgroup lead, at Meera.Raja@CityTech.org, to learn how your community can engage residents, promote digital skills, and increase civic engagement.