

THE OPPORTUNITY PROJECT



User Advocate

ROLE OVERVIEW

TOP is a sprint-based innovation program that 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. More than **200 digital products** have been created through TOP to address problems like disaster response, youth and veteran homelessness, reducing ocean plastics, COVID-19, rural economic development and more.

User Advocates are community leaders, local or national advocates, and people with direct lived experience in the target challenges.

→ Read this document to learn more about how it works.

See past products from TOP at opportunity.census.gov/showcase

How It Works

01 – IDENTIFY CHALLENGES

Federal agencies identify high-priority challenges facing the public.

02 – TEAM UP

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

03 – BUILD

During virtual product development sprints, agencies and stakeholders collaborate with product teams and other sprint participants to create new digital products such as mapping tools, apps, websites, games, AI algorithms, network visualizations, and more. Sprints typically include user research, data exploration, and product development.

04 – LAUNCH

Products are showcased at Census Open Innovation Summit, which is an open press event.

05 – REACH END USERS

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

→ Your Role

USER ADVOCATE

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 product teams in designing solutions that are realistic and useful for the target end users. A user advocate's role includes:

- Provide insights to product 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 product teams on their products throughout the sprint
- Join "milestone" calls (User Research, Concept Pitch, Beta Demo)

User Advocates (UAs) serve a critical role helping product 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 product 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 product teams and other sprint participants to co-create useful solutions for your community.

Why Participate?

01 Build relationships and partnerships

Create strategic relationships in government and develop partnerships with product companies and nonprofits.

02 Shape solutions available to your community

Speak on behalf of your community to have a real impact on the challenges that are tackled and the products, solutions, technology that are created.

03 Share your insights

Contribute to knowledge sharing between product teams, end users, and federal agencies.

Examples of User Advocate Contributions

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

Other Roles

GOVERNMENT

Federal agencies & local governments define major challenges facing the public within their mission areas. During the 12-14-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 (i.e. designers, consultants, product managers) from outside of government who consult product teams on how to develop viable solutions (digital or analog) that can be maintained and implemented after the sprint.

PRODUCT/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 solutions they build, and typically own and maintain the products and associated IP after the sprints.

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 product 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, product teams cannot build meaningful solutions. Having collaborators with direct knowledge of their community’s pain points, perspectives, and experiences, allows product 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 product teams better understand the central issues and narrow down their focus.

During the sprints, product teams may ask you for more information to better understand your community by conducting interviews, focus groups, workshops, or online surveys. Product 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 product 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 product teams with members of their community to conduct user testing. User testing allows product 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 product 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 product 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, product 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 product teams?

We encourage User Advocates to check in with the product 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.