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New group seeks to increase pro bono work by architects

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A San Francisco nonprofit is trying to persuade architecture firms to spend one percent of their time each year doing pro bono work.

Public Architecture launched the One Percent Solution program in March and has gotten online pledges from 48 firms for a total of 17,650 hours. It calculates a contribution of 20 hours per person per year.

"Architects' hours, when compounded, can create a larger impact and a larger movement," said John Cary, executive director of Public Architecture. He will talk about the program at the American Institute of Architect conference in Seattle this weekend.

While pro bono work has had long-standing support from the legal profession, Cary said One Percent Solution wants to raise awareness among the architecture profession.

The program aims to connect communities that cannot afford professional design services with architecture firms that until now have had no formal way to manage requests for pro bono work.

"One of the things that became painfully and quickly evident was the lack of resources and lack of institutionalized support that the profession of architecture offered architects," said John Peterson, founder and president of Public Architecture.

Peterson worked on pro bono projects through his for-profit firm,

Peterson Architects in San Francisco, and realized the need outstripped his firm's resources. This led him to start Public Architecture. One Percent Solution is one of five projects that Public Architecture is working on.

The National Endowment of the Arts provided a one-year grant to help launch the One Percent program.

"We're really trying to raise the profile of people that do this kind of work and to get them the kind of recognition and exposure that they aren't otherwise getting," Cary said.

Abrahams Architects and Schemata Workshop are two Seattle firms that have made online pledges. Both were doing pro bono work prior to the One Percent Solution program.

Grace Kim of Schemata Workshop said she and her partner Mike Mariano signed up "hoping to inspire other people, whether it was nationally or in the Seattle market, to really take a look at their practices and see if they could also contribute."

Peterson said he thinks more architects can help, and he sees the one percent goal as just a start.

"For a profession that has not been courted to give on a regular and institutionalized way, one percent was a beginning," Peterson said. "We didn't want to scare people away, particularly, at the larger firms where one percent can equal hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fees."

Once the program was in place, Cary contacted Ralph Hawkins, president and CEO of the large Dallas-based architecture firm HKS, Inc. Hawkins pledged one percent on behalf of 450 employees, for a total of 9,000 hours.

Hawkins said he thinks the program is important, even though his firm already had a pro bono policy in place.

"We all have our own programs going, but I think this one percent solution really sets the goal for all of us to attain," Hawkins said.

Peterson and Cary encourage professionals in all design-related fields to participate.

Firms sign up on the One Percent Web site, but manage their own effort. **A** Web page is created that displays the firm's contact information, profile, images and pro bono policy.

"It's kind of nice to know you wouldn't need a connection if you found us on the Web site," said Nazim Nice of Abrahams Architects. "You could do a cold call and be taken seriously." He joined the program after reading about it in Architectural Record.

Cary said the program will be a "matchmaking organization" where

nonprofit organizations and communities will be paired with qualified architects and teams of professionals.

Public Architecture is preparing advice with the law firm Long & Levit to address legal issues surrounding pro bono work, including basic contract language and management tools for working with pro bono clients. Long & Levit donated its time to this project.

Firms that have signed up with the One Percent Solution offer some advice on managing pro bono projects.

Grace Kim said Schemata Workshop often works with a team on pro bono projects. In collaboration with Swenson Say Faget and Synergy Construction, the firm is working on a renovation for the Alliance Center in Kent, where a consortium of social service providers offer services for low-income families.

"We're able to do that because we have a network of consultants and contractors that we've developed relationships with over time," Kim said. "It's not just us. We work with others, like a structural engineering company and a contractor, that have a shared social mission."

Nazim Nice said Abraham Architects manages projects with two different approaches. It donates services on a project-by-project basis, as it did with tenant improvements for the Pride Foundation. It also donates consulting services at fundraising auctions for nonprofits.

"The auction has been an interesting way to do it because it's a small portion of time donated, but the money goes to a great cause," Nice said.

When HKS commits to a pro bono project, Hawkins said he finds out who is interested in working on the project and can usually organize a team within a week.

"Sometimes, I have specific people in mind that might have specialty expertise in the type of building that they're talking about, and I try to get them onboard."

HKS has worked with Big Brothers Big Sisters, Hearts & Hammers, and ACE (Architects Engineers and Contractors), a program that mentors high school students.

Hawkins said his firm has done pro bono work for more than 30 years.

"When people ask me what does it take to be a principal at HKS, one of the things is that you participate in the community at some level," Hawkins said.