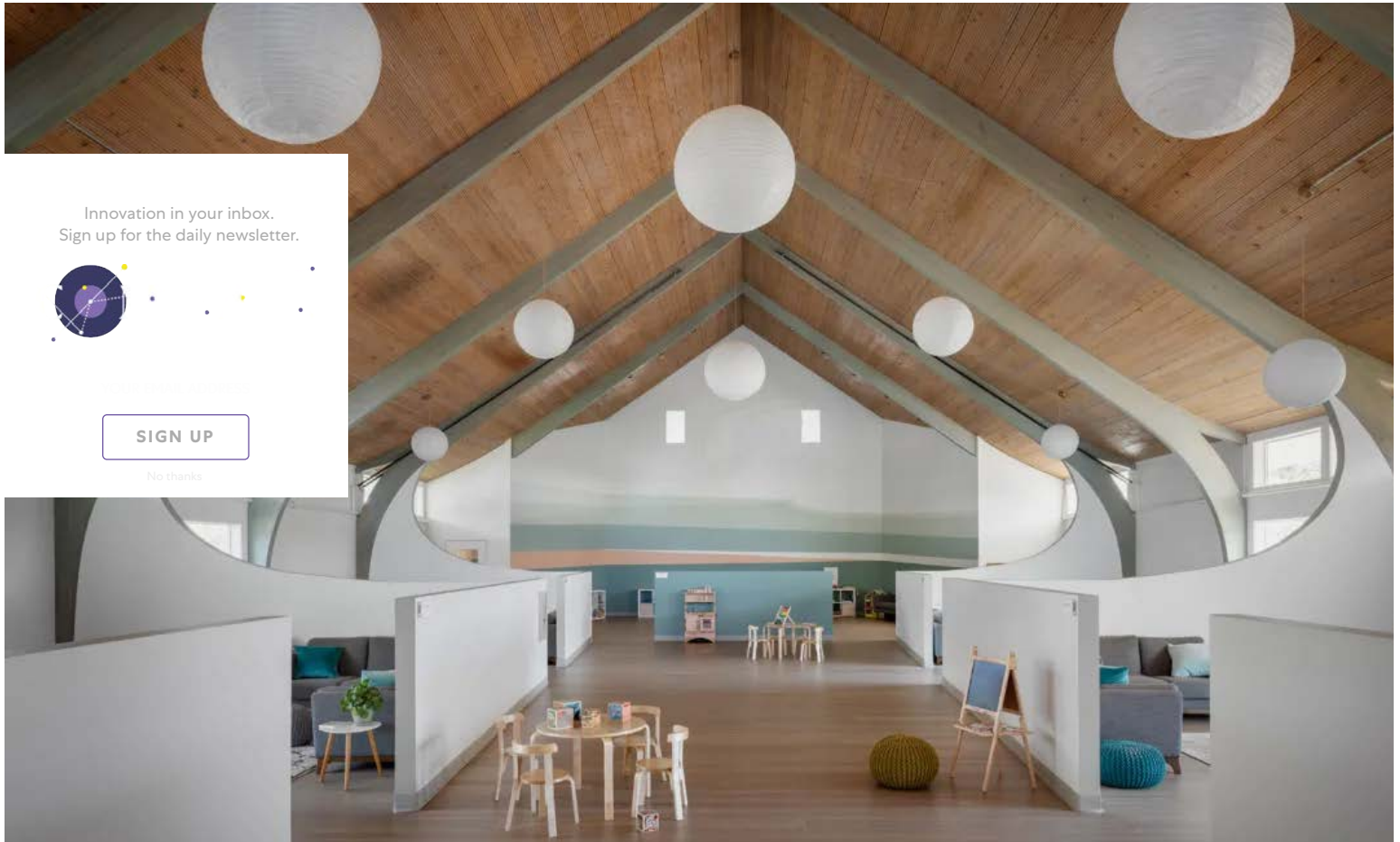


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
How one interior designer is fighting homelessness—with her invoices

Interior designers typically serve the 1%. Jessica Helgerson wants to turn that on its head.



[Photo: courtesy Jessica Helgerson Interior Design]

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“The one percent” is most often used as a pejorative, shorthand for elite, out-of-touch vultures who prey on the working class. But a new initiative from a Portland, Oregon, interior designer is taking that moniker and flipping it on its head.

The **One Percent Project**, launched by Jessica Helgerson Interior Design, asks clients to put 1% of their invoice total toward addressing homelessness. This line item, which is totally optional, will appear on their monthly invoices as a sort of “voluntary tax” that the firm likens to grocery stores asking you to round up.

There are a number of **initiatives** in the design community that are aimed at providing free or inexpensive design services to organizations that combat homelessness. But much of the time what organizations really need is cash that frees them from having to constantly fundraise. The One Percent Project aims to fill in that gap.



[Photo: courtesy Jessica Helgerson Interior Design]

When JHID contacted clients to let them know this charge would be added to January’s invoices, only one of 25 clients opted out. “One percent of our invoices is less than \$100 in a lot of cases,” says JHID managing director Kate Sullivan. “When you’re working with people who can afford an interior designer, that might not be a lot of money to them. That has really fostered a lot of enthusiasm; people are excited they can be part of it.”

Helgerson officially launched the initiative in 2019, after a talk she gave at Design Week Portland. The early iteration, which was more ad hoc, asked individuals and businesses to donate 1% of their income or profits to combat homelessness. In the first year and a half, more than a dozen businesses and individuals contributed, and the project was able to donate \$195,000 in unrestricted grants to three Portland organizations.

Logistically, the funds are routed to the Oregon Community Foundation, which acts as a sort of clearinghouse, vetting nonprofits and managing and distributing the funds. OCF charges a fee, which JHID covers, meaning 100% of the donations through the One Percent Project go to organizations on the ground.



[Photo: courtesy Jessica Helgerson Interior Design]

So far, that's meant \$5,000 to [Street Roots](#), after last summer's devastating wildfires made it impossible for the alt weekly to be distributed outside. The funds were able to serve as a stopgap for the people experiencing homelessness who sell the paper. A bigger grant of \$150,000 went to [Community Warehouse](#), a furniture warehouse that lets people transitioning out of homelessness shop for free. The funds allowed them to purchase a second van to use for deliveries. And \$40,000 went to [Portland Homeless Family Solutions](#), to help fund a new permanent shelter, which Helgerson did the interior design work for pro bono.

Helgerson's commitment to fighting homelessness grew out of her work with PHFS, which helps families transitioning out of homelessness. "Three minutes into the meeting, I was weeping," Helgerson says. Her involvement with PHFS led her to other local organizations working with people experiencing homelessness, which has reached crisis levels in Portland. "In each case it was like, they're amazing and the need is so much bigger," she says. "I know that there's plenty of money out there. I wondered if I could build something that could help support them [so they wouldn't] have to fundraise for every single penny."

But even though the initial grants were substantial, "the whole business model was me trying to hustle and beg," Helgerson says. "It wasn't sustainable." When Sullivan joined JHID a year ago, she proposed making the project more explicitly connected to design and home-oriented businesses. "In one way, I'm in the very right line of work and in another way, it's not the right line," says Helgerson, who has lived in Portland for over a decade and watched the unsheltered population grow at the same time as she's taken on bigger and "fancier" projects. This initiative "helps me reconcile [the two]." JHID is donating 1% of its net income to OCF as well.

[Photo: courtesy Jessica Helgerson Interior Design]

JHID's goal is to expand this project far beyond its own client base and to get other firms that work in home-related businesses to add a 1% line item to their invoices as well. "It was important that it not just be interior design," Helgerson says. "But that it be all aspects of the home world. Real estate agents, architects, plumbing, contractors, supply places. It's a very broad world." So far, there's an interior design firm in Seattle that's already implemented it, and they're working with three firms in Portland and two in San Francisco and L.A. The need on the West Coast was [particularly acute](#), as rates of [homelessness](#) were higher than much of the country even before COVID-19 hit.

After Helgerson posted about the project on Instagram last month, she says more than 20 people reached out saying they were interested in the model. "If they could each get 15 to 18 people and then they could get 15 to 18 people, we could make a difference," she says. "It's one part of a big puzzle."

OCF works with nonprofits across the country, so donations can be targeted to groups doing work in a specific area. The beauty of the One Percent Project's model is that there's almost no heavy lifting for companies that want to add the 1% line item. Sullivan says she has been spending about 15% of her time talking to other firms about the initiative and getting things set up on the back end, but she estimates it's about an hour of work for companies that want to join.

"We want to lead the way in terms of people who own businesses or run businesses to think about the adjacencies in terms of charitable giving," Sullivan says.

“Like with Toms giving shoes to kids, or if there’s an airline that’s doing carbon offsetting, or pharmaceuticals giving healthcare. What is that adjacent thing that needs changing in the world and how can we give back? If every business rallied the power of their customer base to do this, imagine how much impact that 1% could have.”

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