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Contact: Jessica Kirby, Partners in Progress

Phone: 250-816-3671

Email: press@pinpmagazine.org



Zahner and Local 68 Mobilize with HKS and Make4Covid to Provide PPE For Care Workers

Missouri-based Zahner is known for pushing the envelope of sheet metal's design capabilities, but a recent project that took only a few weeks to complete is having a massive impact of a different kind: keeping people safe.

Specifically, Zahner and the workforce at Local 68 joined architects HKS and the Make4Covid coalition to create personal protection equipment (PPE) for medical professionals and health care staff caring for COVID-19 patients.

Robert Zahner, senior vice president of the 124-year-old metal engineering and fabrication firm, says of the collaboration, "We jumped at the opportunity when HKS asked if we could participate in making PPE.

"It was a good cause, and we had already established a great relationship with the architects, having worked together on the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles and Pacific Plaza Pavilion park in downtown Dallas."

The task was to create 2,500 face shields, and Zahner points out, "Due to COVID, our engineers were working from home and our Grand Prairie, Texas plant was temporarily shuttered, so our first priority was to get everything up and running in a safe and responsible manner."

The company hired nurses to take the temperatures of staff and address any concerns, and hand wash stations were set up throughout the facility.

“Maintaining social distancing wasn’t a problem since the breaks between our shears, punches and other equipment are 10 feet apart,” Zahner says.

Zahner, who was an original member of the Best Practices Task Force overseen by Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA), adds, “Our staff uniformly bought into the importance of maintaining safety during this project, and as a result we maintained a COVID-free workplace.”

This does not surprise Calvin Young, business manager for Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) Local 68: “Zahner is one of the oldest and most experienced architectural contractors in our organization, very dedicated to safety as well as project excellence.”

The face shields were made from durable but flexible PETG plastic and punched in Grand Prairie. They were then augmented with headbands created from HKS’s 3D printers and laser cutters.

Great care was taken to make the products as safe as possible to use. Any staff handling the PPE was masked and gloved, and each shield was disinfected, bagged in groups of two, sealed, and then left alone for several days to ensure that any contamination died off before being shipped.

The shields were ultimately delivered to dozens of health care systems and front line medical providers across the United States and in Mexico.

This wasn’t the only volunteer effort geared towards helping COVID care workers. “Local 68 purchased five sheets of 030 aluminum that our office staff sheared up into one quarter inch and three inch long strips for face masks that were being sewn together and shipped all over Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and New Mexico,” Young says. “Locals 54,67,68, and 214, which make up the Southwest Gulf Coast Regional Council, each did the same thing.”

The development of vaccines notwithstanding, most health professionals think it will be a while before COVID-19 is fully behind us, but if more PPE is required, Zahner's partnership with Local 68 and HKS will continue.

Zahner says, "We're on board to cut more shields. We were proud to join the effort with HKS, Make4Covid, and the skilled craftspersons at Local 68. We're ready to go again if and when the need arises."

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