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Plumbers Without Borders provides clean water worldwide

Organization looking for volunteers

Special to CONTRACTOR

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- American Standard became the first corporate sponsor of Plumbers Without Borders.
- The organization helps establish online database connecting organizations with plumbers.
- Around the world, volunteers help raise the standard of sanitation, improve access to clean water, and help save lives around the world.

PISCATAWAY, N.J. — In an early 20th century advertisement from American Standard Brands, a proud plumber holding a pipe wrench stands below a slogan that reads “The Plumber Protects the Health of the Nation.” Now a five-year old, Seattle-based non-profit called Plumbers Without Borders (PWB) wants to update that truism for the 21st century.

“We want to be able to say that the plumber protects the health of the world,” said Domenico DiGregorio, a retired plumbing industry pro who is the organization’s co-founder and president. “As the world marked the 13th annual World Toilet Day in November, we wanted to see how this relatively young organization is working to raise awareness.”



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Plumbers Without Borders Board Member Jed Scheuermann works with a student in Haiti.

One objective DiGregorio noted is to compile a growing database of plumbing and mechanical pros worldwide that can be easily tapped by non-profit groups in need. There have been inquiries from a variety of groups working in several developing countries, as well as in the U.S.

"Everyone needs clean water," said DiGregorio. Unfortunately, a lot of people in developing countries don't have access to it, and some people here at home can't afford it."

In May 2014, American Standard became the first corporate sponsor of Plumbers Without Borders, providing funding to help establish the online database connecting needy organizations with plumbers and mechanical tradespeople interested in volunteering their services to raise the standard of sanitation, improve hygiene and access to clean water, and help save lives around the world.

Medical outreach for Ethiopia

In 2013, DiGregorio and co-founder Fred Volkrs, traveled to Ethiopia with a group of volunteer doctors and nurses from Seattle Alliance Outreach. Their mission was to help design solutions for upgrading the plumbing system at the Zewditu Hospital in Addis Ababa, as well as helping to set up a non-profit dialysis clinic. What they saw at the hospital would be unthinkable in developed countries.



Fred Volkrs at Zewditu hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"There were no working faucets in the operating room pre-wash area, and doctors had to resort to using water from five gallon buckets poured over their hands prior to surgery," said DiGregorio.

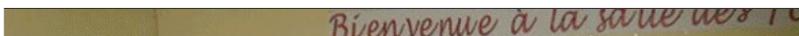
Before setting up the dialysis clinic, the group toured local private clinics. What they found was troubling enough that they agreed to extend their stay to work with the local clinics.

"In nearly every clinic there was a risk of cross-connection problems between the dialysis machine and the sewer drain," explained DiGregorio. "Compare that to the U.S., where nearly every municipality has a Cross-Connection/Backflow Prevention Program in place. The solution wasn't to fix the problem but to teach local personnel how to eliminate the potential cross-connection contamination hazard."

Clean water for Haiti

The emphasis on training is typical. Plumbers Without Borders vice president Fred Schilling said that while the organization will refer volunteer plumbers to work on specific projects, its main focus is showing local personnel how to do the work.

"We don't want to just show up with a tool box and say we're here to fix stuff," said Schilling. "When we're finished with a project, we want the local people to be able to help themselves."



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Fred Schilling and Haiti Tec students pose with plumbing tools that were donated to the school.

For instance, Schilling has made three trips to Haiti, where he has been training students at Haiti Tec vocational college in Port au Prince to install water purification systems in clinics and schools, among other plumbing work. The systems were designed by World Water Partners, an organization affiliated with Seattle University.

Another plumbing initiative in the Caribbean country includes teaching Haiti Tec students how to install SaTo hygienic latrine pans developed by American Standard through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The SaTo pan employs mechanical and water seals that reduce disease transmission by closing off pit latrines — widely used throughout Asia and Africa — from the open air. Schilling helped install the first such device in a private home. He said that the hygienic benefits were immediately noticeable and applauded by local families. New projects are already in the works.

One challenge, said Schilling, is the red tape involved in getting equipment into Haiti. PWB and World Water Partners decided to partner with Food For the Poor, an organization that understood the local system and had experience getting supplies and equipment into the country.

"Our ability to build such partnerships has been crucial to our success," explained Schilling. "One of our best assets is the negotiation skill we learned as plumbing contractors."

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Schilling, a master plumber who serves as the plumbing industry representative on the Florida Building Commission, is also putting those negotiating skills to work in Haiti by helping to create a self-sustaining system for training and certifying plumbing pros.

"It's a country with a population of 12 million people and not a single certified plumber," stated Schilling. "If we can do this, it will make a big difference in the health of this country."

Closer to home

PWB's efforts aren't limited to developing countries. Back in the U.S., the group has completed several community projects and has matched volunteer plumbers with non-profits such as Habitat for Humanity, Step by Step, Helping Link, Re-building Together and others. The organization is currently looking into ways to help local veterans in need.

Going forward, one of PWB's main goals is to establish local chapters both nationally and internationally. Of course the success of that effort will depend on the organization growing its global volunteer database.



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Everyone at Plumbers Without Borders is confident that growth will happen, and that the result will be a much-needed set of resources for thousands of non-profit organizations engaged in water and sanitation projects worldwide. DiGregorio said that the opportunity to serve good causes is something the plumbing industry is committed to and is well positioned to achieve. "I've spoken with a lot of plumbers who want to use their skills to help others, but might be unsure exactly how or where to volunteer," DiGregorio concluded. "We're filling that need and making that connection."

To learn more about Plumbers Without Borders, visit www.plumberswithoutborders.org or call 206-390-5000.

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