



Photos by Michael R. Schmidt

Serious work, relaxed environment

By Dustin J. Seibert

The loft-style office of the Chicago Bar Foundation's Justice Entrepreneurs Project looks less like a conventional law firm and more like a small tech startup.

The main area consists of rows of desks separated only by frosted partitions with phone and laptop chargers jutting through them from the floor.

"Mailboxes" consist of individually labeled Tupperware containers stacked on a cart in the corner of a collaborative space.

There's one conference room, one copy machine, a stripped-down kitchen space and the basic understanding that employees clean up after themselves.

That the small space stands in stark contrast to the many sleek high-rise firms a few blocks northeast of its 208 S. Jefferson St. location was a conscious decision that reflects the program's goal: Provide legal services to people who fall in the "justice gap" by earning too much to qualify for free legal representation

but not enough to afford the typical attorney.

"We wanted to have a space that has good energy and vibe to it ... something that was modeled off of other tech incubators," said program director Taylor Hammond, who left a for-profit practice to engage in civic-minded legal work.

"The space fosters collaboration and fits with the theme of program, which is to find innovative ways to practice and sharing ideas and determining ways to provide affordable legal services to people."

The Chicago Bar Foundation established the Justice Entrepreneurs Project (JEP) with seed money and a steering committee that helped develop the program model. The first class of participants started in June 2013, and the project moved into its current space four months later.

The CBF connects with law schools, job boards and other networks to find potential

program participants for what Hammond said is a highly competitive interview process; the program has received more than 150 applications to date.

If the modest 4,300-square-foot space matches the humble nature of JEP's goals, so do its inhabitants — younger, idealistic lawyers looking to build socially conscious practices.

"We're looking for entrepreneurial lawyers who want to start their own firms but are also very much public interest and social justice-minded and believe in what we're trying to do enough to commit themselves to this type of program," Hammond said.

Minimal use of space for many firms

Although there are as many as 30 separate law firms running out of the JEP office at any given time, common aspects of most law firms — including assistants and telephone lines — are absent.

The reception area at the front of the suite is only intermittently occupied, and each par-

ticipant's business card — many of which are available at the reception area — contain phone numbers that go to their personal lines. The number on the JEP business card sends callers to Hammond.

Though each participant exists as separate business entities, the shared space and program membership demands that they interact with each other when necessary. They collaborate for weekly meetings, mostly designed to train them on how to develop their own practices. And they must use Google Calendar to schedule times to use the two meeting rooms for visiting clients.

The 20 or so desks in the main area are for participants who have completed the 18-month program's first six months, which requires them to complete 20 hours a week of pro bono work for nonprofits such as the Chicago Legal Clinic and The Law Project. When the project "graduates" cycle out to continue running their firms independent of the JEP, a new class comes in; the next is scheduled for May.

Though other CBF members work on the JEP, Hammond is the only full-time employee with an office in the space. Program participants pay monthly rent for the year in which they do occupy a desk.

The JEP has its current space leased through



2016, though Hammond hopes that expansion will come as the program catches on. The foundation has received a grant and established an as-yet-unannounced financial partnership, both of which will pick up where the CBF seed money left off.

"Our long-term goal is to try to learn from what we're doing here and spread knowledge about the program so that other attorneys and organizations can do something similar and perhaps replicate the project," Hammond said. ■

djohnseib@hotmail.com

