

## Worker co-op provides opportunities for people living with mental illness

Team Werks Co-operative is an example of how the co-operative principles can be successfully merged with the best practices of psychosocial rehabilitation to provide meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with a serious psychiatric illness.

Operating out of Thunder Bay Ontario's Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital, Team Werks Co-operative is a worker co-op that provides employment opportunities and services to clients living with mental illness. The co-op was established in 1998, in partnership with St. Joseph's Care Group and is now part of a larger outpatient vocational program, Employment Options.

Team Werks is comprised of six distinct business ventures: Wood Werks (bare wood furniture), Water Werks (car wash), Rag Werks (manufacture and sale of rags), Paper Werks (confidential paper shredding services), Piece Werks (item assembly and packaging services) and the Good Times Café (coffee shop within the hospital). Job creation is only one of the components of the program. Assessments, work placements and job coaching services form the basis for the program, which is geared to employment within the community as well as the co-op itself. In addition to the 28 worker-owners, the co-op acts as a training site for up to 30 additional clients who are accessing its employment/vocational services.

The individuals are on paid placement within one of the business ventures. The placements are up to one year after which some clients move on to community employment, volunteering or educational pursuits, while others become full-fledged members of the co-op.

Members have a part-time position and are provided work accommodations and support when and where required based on their individual needs. Through the co-op, many of them are able to maintain their social benefits in addition to earning a modest wage, patronage returns and a quarterly bonus, depending on the financial position of the co-operative. Once they have gained the necessary confidence, skills and experience, member-owners have the opportunity to move on to other employment in the community if they choose.

*"The worker co-operative is a good fit because it encourages a team approach to running the enterprise,"* says Doug Dowhos, Supervisor of Employment Options for St. Joseph's Care Group. Team Werks provides the added benefit of giving members control in their own enterprise and their employment goals. He notes that self-direction is a best practice in psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery. In fact, the compatibility of the co-operative principles with the best practices of social rehabilitation is at the core of the co-ops success. (see table below)

# MERGING THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL REHABILITATION BEST PRACTICES

## CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

- Voluntary and open membership
- Democratic member control
- Member economic participation
- Autonomy and independence
- Co-operation among co-operatives
- Concern for community

## PSYCHOSOCIAL REHABILITATION BEST PRACTICES

- Consumer Choice
- Respect and Dignity
- Actively engage
- Individualized
- Service integration
- Community integration

As with all co-ops, Team Werks is focused on a unified bottom line that addresses both financial and social objectives. Financially, the co-op is looking to be self-sustaining and integrated within the community. Socially, it aims to develop work and life skills and aid in the recovery goals of its members.

The unique objectives of all six of the Team Werks' business units are tied to the co-op's overall mandate. In keeping with its financial mandate, the co-op's structure is flexible so that new ventures can be added and poor performers eliminated. At the same time, the diversity of its operations means that initiatives with high social value but low business value can be maintained.

The innovative strategies of Team Werks empowers individuals dealing with mental illness, enabling them to gain a measure of control over their lives while still receiving individualized employment supports and services.

