

Co-op Principles Merge with Psychosocial Rehabilitation Best Practices to Provide Employment for Mental Illness Survivors

Activity: *Provides supported employment to individuals with psychiatric illness*

Type of Co-operative: *Worker Co-op / Social Co-op*

Members: *26 survivors of mental illness and addiction*

Location: *Thunder Bay, Ontario*

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 the St. Joseph's Care Group, and is now part of a larger outpatient vocational program, Employment Options.

Team Werks is comprised of 8 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 Good Times Cafe (coffee shop within the hospital). But job creation is only one component 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. The 26 worker-owners are supported by a team of 20 to 30 non-members who participate in assessment, training and placement activities within 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. And 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 employment goal. 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-op's success.

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. And 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.