

MAKING AN IMPACT

Through HCF Grants

Helping Adults with Mental Health Challenges to Work and Earn

A one-of-a-kind business venture is helping people with autism spectrum disorder and schizophrenia work and earn wages. The financial benefit for these hard-to-employ adults is only part of the story: they also benefit from improved social functioning and a sense of belonging.

"We see the difference employment makes," says Rick Ludkin, the manager in charge. "As it does for all of us, regular work gives folks with severe mental challenges a sense of purpose and identity and self-worth. They are earning money, materially improving their quality of life, and contributing to society."

This venture is known as Manor Personnel Deployment, Inc. (MPD). A consumer-driven business for clients of Woodview Manor, it was incorporated in 1994 as a supported independent living program for people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD affects at least one in 160 children – more common than childhood cancer, diabetes, or Down syndrome – and causes a triad of difficult symptoms: impairments in social interaction, communication difficulties, and odd repetitive interests and behaviours. There is also a lack of basic problem-solving skills. ASD is present from infancy and persists throughout life. Woodview Manor and MPD focus on more-able people with ASD; that is, those who have an IQ of 70 or more and who are able to communicate.

For eight years, MPD remained quite small, employing people to collate flyers, deliver advertising and do some housecleaning under contracts MPD developed with outside businesses. MPD was staffed by the support workers at Woodview Manor.

Then, in 2002, Woodview received funding to provide "dedicated" staff for the MPD business venture, and the number of people with ASD employed and taking home regular paycheques increased dramatically. In 2005, a TPT grant from Hamilton Community Foundation allowed the program to expand to include people with schizophrenia.

MPD has contracts for flyer collation with *The Hamilton Spectator*; with Wesley Urban Ministries to clean at their rehab program on the grounds of St. Joseph's Centre for Mountain Health Services; and for lawn care and data entry. Currently, the monthly average payroll is 53 workers – all with severe mental health challenges. In 2006, 57 individuals earned a total of \$123,303. Forty-two of them worked 10 months or more. The average monthly salary was \$206 per person. Workers also benefit from regular "company dinners" and performance incentives.

How HCF is Helping

- *HCF has supported Woodview in various ways since the early 1990s when it provided funding for equipment that helped launch a camping program for teens with ASD. (The program continues to this day, in a greatly expanded form.)*
- *Through the Tackling Poverty Together Program, HCF helped fund the expansion of MPD to include people with schizophrenia in 2005. The Clark Family Foundation Fund helped MPD buy a van to transport workers and equipment to various worksites.*
- *HCF's Community Health, Education and Research Fund supported Woodview's research with the Offord Centre into the outcomes and program needs of people with ASD in 2006. In 2007, the Clark Family Foundation Fund again helped purchase equipment to expand the business.*

The income can be significant. For example, almost all MPD's clients with schizophrenia live in second-level lodging homes. Their provincial government disability cheque is turned over to the lodging home operator who then gives them \$126/month "comfort allowance." The allowance must cover clothing, toiletries, entertainment etc., - everything except room and board. The MPD job often doubles a client's disposable income.

The non-financial benefits to clients are also enormous. "It's given me work," says Grant, a client of MPD. "It means an increase in income; a chance for fellowship with other people. Work has changed my life for the better through meeting other people." Other MPD clients mention the importance of income, structure to their day, independence, camaraderie, and hope.

Mental Health Challenges and Employment

People with mental health challenges often find the standard work environment difficult:

- Their medications may make it difficult to "get going" early in the day and miss start times: MPD has found that folks with schizophrenia, for example, do better with afternoon and evening employment.
- Fluctuations in their "wellness" interfere with regular work; MPD accommodates that, covers their work, and welcomes people back to their jobs after absences – there's a place to come back to.
- Workers with significant mental health difficulties often can't generalize skills from one setting to another – they need support to employ learned skill sets in each new job situation, no matter how similar those situations might be.
- General physical fitness is a factor. Workers whose support includes attention to diet, regular group workouts and sports, have more stamina for an eight-hour workday.
- People who have regular support in their living arrangements do better – small problems are often picked up early and don't become big ones.
- Change in the government's employment supports program is closing off avenues of support for clients like those served by MPD.
- More-able people with ASD fall between the cracks: they don't qualify for developmental services funding because they don't have an intellectual handicap (their IQ's are over 70); but because ASD is a developmental disorder, they aren't eligible for Ministry of Health funding either.

Who Wins with the MPD Program

- *People with significant mental health challenges improve their quality of life by earning wages; they enjoy the benefits of socialization and self-esteem that come from participating in a positive work environment; their medical condition also tends to improve – people who feel good about themselves and what they're doing are much less likely to suffer a relapse.*
- *Employers get quality work done by motivated workers.*
- *The community gains economic contributors.*

The key to the program's success is the preparation and support clients receive to help them be successful. "People with these mental health challenges need individualized support," says Rick Ludkin. "We've learned that for these folks, long-term involvement in the workforce depends on a positive atmosphere in the workplace. Our staff create that. We also can tailor the workload to a person's capacity for work – for example, the number of hours they can tolerate per week. For some, just a few hours is enough. Also, when their wellness fluctuates, as it often does, we help them attend to that. We cover their work and hold their job. When they're better, there's a place for them to come back to. That creates the conditions for them to succeed at employment."

MPD hopes to find more contracts, with higher paying jobs, and to place more folks with ASD and schizophrenia in employment. They are also studying the difference between the two groups of clients in the workplace and continue to contribute to learning in their field.