

# Co-op garden a training centre

The image is a composite graphic. At the top, a dark blue banner contains the text 'Agent-Find.com' in a large, white, serif font, with the phone number '1-877-702-6787' in a smaller white font below it. Below the banner is a photograph of a two-story house with a white picket fence in front. A white sign on the fence reads 'SOLD' in red letters at the top, and 'HOUSE FOR SALE' in blue letters below. At the bottom of the image, a black rectangular box contains white text: 'Tell us about the property that you wish to buy or sell and we will find the Right Agent for you.' and 'This is a FREE Service!' in a bold font.

Kris Ketonen

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From left, Volker Kromm, Regional Food Distribution Association; Kevin Albisser, Team Werks Cooperative; Tracy Buckler, president and CEO, St. Joseph's Care Group; and Doug Dowhos, St. Joseph's Care Group, were at the Green Werks garden Thursday morning.

St. Joseph's Care Group clients are getting their hands dirty. The agency on Thursday launched its Green Werks Garden, located on a plot of land behind the Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital, which will give clients — those with mental health and addictions challenges — a chance to develop skills while growing vegetables for the Regional Food Distribution Network.

“It's somewhat unique in the fact that we're combining . . . the training and employment piece together with the community garden piece,” said Doug Dowhos, supervisor of employment options for the care group. “There are a number of community gardens out there, but this is probably one of the few out there that are doing both,” he said. The garden is part of the Team Werks Cooperative, which is a collection of businesses that provide clients of mental health services with skills they'd require to secure employment. In Thunder Bay, Dowhos said, the co-operative runs several businesses. For example, the Good Times Cafe is a coffee shop, while Paper Werks shreds documents. Water Werks washes and details vehicles, while Scan Werks is a document management operation. The skills clients gain by participating are invaluable, Dowhos said. “For a lot of our clients, you're looking at seven, eight, nine, 10 years that they've been unemployed,” he said. “This gives them a first step to get some skills, get some confidence, work with their peers, and then hopefully move on from there to potential employment in the community, or to become a member of the co-op.” The Team Werks co-op provides part-time positions for worker-owners in addition to the opportunities for mental health service clients. “If someone is interested in retail sector and getting some customer service skills, they can work in our cafe,” Dowhos said. “If you're interested in getting your hands dirty and working in our garden, well, you can work in our garden.” The difference I've seen in the clients from a recovery

and quality-of-life standpoint is huge,” he said. “A number of them ultimately end up getting work in the community, going back to school or volunteering.

“And for some, it becomes a part-time job; working in the co-op is what they want.”

Care group client and Team Werks Cooperative president Kevin Albisser said the co-op has grown steadily over the last few years.

“It’s good for people to get out and do things and have a purpose,” he said, adding that he’s seen plenty of people go through Team Werks and then land a job in the community.

“But it’s entirely up to you,” Albisser said. “You can do whatever you want.”



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