



4 Overlea Blvd.,
Toronto, ON M4H 1A4
Tel: (416) 421-7117
Fax: (416) 421-7116
commongroundco-op@bellnet.

THE COMMON GROUND COOPERATIVE STORY

Common Ground Cooperative is a non-profit service organization, incorporated under the Ontario Cooperative Corporations Act. Close to one hundred citizens in the community who have a concern about the lack of employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities have come together as members of our Co-op to create a support umbrella for the establishment and development of business partnerships as a form of employment among this target group.

The sole purpose of the Co-operative is to provide the dignity of long-term employment for people who have intellectual disabilities, who otherwise would not be able to participate in the world of work. Our Business Partners are adults in receipt of the Ontario Disability Support Programme (ODSP) income benefits who have been on the margins of regular employment since leaving the school system.

The project began in 1998 when Jim and Carolyn Lemon applied on behalf of their daughter Cathy for an Individualized Quality of Life government grant (known today as the Options Programme) under the Ministry of Community and Social Services. When Cathy received the grant, she and her family decided to hire a support worker and provide legal counsel to help her start up a wholesale bakery and catering business. Community Living Toronto (CLT) offered to them the free use of a commercial kitchen in one of their group homes. In exchange, Cathy and her family agreed to invite two other CLT clients to join the business. Lemon & Allspice Cookery (hereinafter called the Cookery) was chosen as the name. They began, with the help of the support worker, by baking and selling cookies to order and using the TTC to make the deliveries. They initially marketed their products to various groups within CLT, to church and community groups, and friends and neighbours. As they gained more customers, they added to their menu several other types of baked goods plus sandwiches, bag lunches, salads, and fruit and vegetable trays.

As the business grew, Cathy's parents engaged Brian Iler, of Iler, Campbell, to assist them to develop a model for the business. After looking at several models, such as the Kingston, Ontario worker co-ops, they decided to invite the people working at the Cookery to form a legal business partnership. After educating the workers about how a business partnership would operate, eight people, all of whom have intellectual disabilities and were in receipt of government benefits, signed the papers to establish the partnership. At the end of each month the support worker divided a portion of the sales revenue to pay the Partners. They continued to need the services of a support worker (more properly called a job coach) to work alongside them, but Cathy's parents also recognized the need for staff that could oversee finances and administration. For this, more grant money was needed. Iler suggested that they organize a non-profit co-operative that could qualify for grants, from among people in the community who had an interest in the project. A group of five volunteers began meeting in September 1999 and they became the first Board of Directors of Common Ground Cooperative, Inc. in April 2000.

The Common Ground Board of Directors applied to the Ontario Disability Support Programme (ODSP) Employment Supports Innovative Funding, under the Ministry of Community, and Social Services, for a grant to pay a Coordinator, administrative expenses and the start-up costs for a second business. The grant was approved in December 2000 and the Board hired a full-time Coordinator. A Job Coach was hired to help set up a second business, a retail snack bar called the Coffee Shed in December 2001. Six people joined this partnership. It was established in Surrey Place Centre, an office building in the Queen's Park area of downtown Toronto, where 120 professional staff provide therapeutic services to people with intellectual disabilities.

A Trillium grant, awarded to the Co-operative in July 2003, provided for renovations to a kitchen for the Cookery at a new location, in a different Community Living Toronto building. The Cookery began operations at its new, fully equipped kitchen in September 2003. Offices of the Co-operative, housing the Coordinator and a full-time Administrative Assistant, are located in the same building, the Jessie Manson Employment Training Services Centre at 4 Overlea Boulevard in Toronto.

In September 2003, a second Coffee Shed was set up at New College on the University of Toronto campus to provide snack services. Nine people joined this partnership. In September 2004, a third Coffee Shed opened with five partners at the headquarters of Jewish Vocational Services on Tycos Drive. Most of the snacks and sandwiches that the three Sheds sell are supplied daily by the Cookery. Since the beginning, Partners in each business have met monthly to make decisions regarding work procedures, products, and marketing. They also participate in selecting and training apprentices who may later become Partners and participate in interviews for hiring new Job Coaches.

Common Ground initiated a formal Apprenticeship Programme in the summer of 2003 when sixteen Apprentices undertook our three-month skills development training, some at the Coffee Shed and others at the Cookery. Most of these Apprentices have become Partners in the businesses.

The Ministry of Community and Social Services Foundations program has approved new base funding in 2005/06 for a new Training Coordinator and 7 participants.

Today, a Director, Financial Administrator, and seven full time equivalent Job Coaches provide employment support to over fifty Partners and Apprentices in four businesses. The share of revenues received by the Partners varies from month to month depending upon the sales. Customers of the Cookery include over seventy organizations such as Dixon Hall, Family Services Association, Alternative Grounds Coffee House, Special Olympics, and St. Christopher's House. Partners continue to make deliveries to customers using the TTC but larger orders are taken by vehicle.

A seven person Board of Directors, is elected by members of the Co-op at the Annual General Meeting in November. With each of its businesses the Co-op has signed a Services Agreement setting out the terms and conditions of providing financial management, marketing and administrative services to the businesses in exchange for fees or in-kind services from the businesses.

KEY PARTICIPANTS IN COMMON GROUND



BUSINESS PARTNERS: the people with disabilities who work in the three businesses. (Currently 51) They are paid from a portion of the revenues earned by each business each month. The Business Partners are a culturally diverse group of adults who live in Toronto and are in receipt of provincial government benefits income. Most of them have attended public schools through some years at the basic level of secondary education, and some, but not all, have a modest degree of literacy, numeracy and verbal communication skills. Some have had one or more temporary jobs or have participated in job training programmes. Some of them are living on their own, with agency or family support, in subsidized housing, group homes or other living arrangements in the city. Others live with their families. They come to us with a desire to be contributing members of society, and to gain a greater degree of financial independence.

APPRENTICES: people with disabilities who are in a training period with an option to become Partners upon invitation of the existing Partners.

STAFF: the Job Coaches who support the businesses by working alongside the Partners during operating hours, the Director, who supervises the Job Coaches and the operations of the two businesses and a Financial Administrator. (Currently we have one full-time Director, one full-time Financial Administrator, a Training Coordinator and seven full-time equivalent Job Coaches.) They are paid through the government and other institutional grants the Co-op has received.

MEMBERS: volunteers from the community (currently 100+) who pay a membership fee to join the Cooperative and elect the Board of Directors.

BOARD MEMBERS: Co-op members elected at the Annual General Meeting (currently 7). The Board hires the Director who is responsible for hiring the other staff. The Partners participate in the hiring process.

COMMITTEES: the standing committees of the Board are Membership and Communications; Fund Raising; Finance; Business Development; Governance, and Human Resources

The Objectives

- To create long-term self-employment through small business partnerships
- To promote development of entrepreneurial skills
- To educate people with disabilities in practices of group self-determination

The Co-operative

Common Ground Co-op is an incorporated, non-profit, co-operative service organization, without share capital, promoting the establishment of self-employment initiatives for people with developmental disabilities. Five people established the Co-op in April 2000 and served on the first Board of Directors. Since its incorporation, the Co-operative has held four Annual General Meetings. The Co-operative has brought together a membership of over one hundred citizens, about half of whom are family members of people with disabilities. As we have doubled our membership in 2004, the membership committee projects that, within the next six months, the Cooperative will exceed one hundred fifty members. The members believe that the wider community has a responsibility for meeting the employment needs of this population. Many of the members are enriching their own lives by contributing their time and talents to this initiative. The City of Toronto is the field of operation for the Co-op and its businesses.

The Mandate

The role of the Co-operative is to support and develop small businesses, through fund-raising, consulting, networking, and service agreements in order to provide the dignity of meaningful employment to people who otherwise would not be able to participate in the world of work.

The Businesses

Common Ground today supports four registered businesses in the food sector. Our practical base of experience began with Lemon & Allspice Cookery, a food catering business started in July 1998. The Co-op established a second registered Business Partnership in 2001, a retail food outlet called The Coffee Shed. Two additional Coffee Sheds opened in 2003 and 2004.