

Cambridge Shelter's In Our Backyard program: neighbours helping neighbours



[Barbara Latkowski](#)

a day ago



1 / 4 MPP for Kitchener South-Hespeler, Jess Dixon, gets to work with a crew from In Our Backyard. | Submitted photo

[Listen to this article](#)

00:06:03

With boots lined up and uniforms neatly hung at The Bridges Emergency Shelter in Cambridge, the [In Our Backyard](#) Garden and Yard Services program gears up for a second season this

spring.

Launched last May, the program provides professional yard and garden maintenance services throughout Waterloo Region offering meaningful employment and personal development opportunities for clients.

In Our Backyard is owned and operated by Cambridge Shelter, a charity that provides safe shelter, programs, and services in support of the hopes and needs of people dealing with life issues.

"What we wanted to do was to create a project where men, who are either staying at the shelter, or who are graduates of the shelter system, can work in order to make money, gain some skills, and build a resume," said Wayne Paddick, executive director at Cambridge Shelter.

"The program offers training so that they can go out and get a real job with a contractor, landscaper, or work that can be transferable into any clear path that they want to get into."

Created in partnership with The Community Company, In Our Backyard, is a Certified B Corporation focused on creating meaningful social projects.

About 15-16 participants took part in the program last season.

"Some were staying at the shelter, and others we onboarded and trained. They all have full uniforms. We created their own space upstairs called the 'firehall', When employees start they day, the 'firehall' is their locker room. They have their own space to get ready for work and a space where they can decompress, after work," Paddick said.

"Immediately, we saw the confidence and the pride as they went off to do a job. They were proud in doing the work and being part of the first year of this program."

Since then, Paddick says some have turned to other work opportunities.

"We work with everyone in areas that maybe they are struggling in, so that when they do start to apply for other jobs, they have that confidence," he said.

[In Our Backyard offers garden and yard services](#) to residential and commercial customers. Services include mowing, edging, weeding, spring/fall clean-ups, monthly maintenance contracts, invasive species consultation and removal, garden consultation, design and installation, garden bed installations, and pollinator and habitat gardens.

"It's only been going since May, and frankly, we were busy from day one until November when

we shut down for the winter," Paddick said.

"These are all jobs that you don't need a lot of complicated tools for. But this year, we will be getting a riding mower because there are a couple contracts with bigger properties for lawn maintenance."

Social enterprise coordinator and crew lead for In Our Backyard, Brenda Walsh, brings over 20 years of experience in the horticulture and landscaping industry as well as about 10 years working alongside vulnerable populations.

Walsh says the opportunity to work for the program could not have come at a better time in her life.

"At some point in my career, I came to a place where I was feeling that the work I was doing, didn't matter. I really wanted to do something that was important to the community, something that does matter," Walsh said.

"When I came across the job posting at the shelter, I said to myself, this is the job I've been waiting for my whole life. It was profound for me. To have the opportunity to do work that I love and that I'm good at, and also support people who are interested in the industry and are trying to better themselves, there is no better combination."

Paddick says Walsh is the perfect fit for the job.

"Brenda not only knows her plants, mulches, grasses, but she has a good rapport with the guys. She understands that there will be days when they are not at their best," Paddick said.

In the future, In Our Backyard will consider adding services such as junk removal, tree pruning and winter work such as snow shovelling

In Our Backyard operates mainly in Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph.

"This year, we are looking at possibly adding a second crew because it was so busy last year," Paddick said.

Paddick is grateful that a number of grants have helped to fund the project.

"Thanks to the Trillium Foundation, a grant in Waterloo Region called the Investment Readiness Program, where we were able to get close to \$200,000 to help us with our startup. Toyota also donated a Tundra pick up truck to cart our stuff around. So now, we have quite the setup," Paddick said.

The Bridges is a year-round emergency shelter and drop-in centre that offers a number of services, programs, and supports to assist clients so they can move towards permanent and affordable housing.

In Our Backyard, helps to address the stigma of homelessness in the community by having clients trained in customer service, work in residential neighbourhoods, and ultimately, provide positive customer experiences.

Cambridge Shelter hopes the enterprise will help to change the conversation around homelessness locally.

"When I talk to people about The Bridges, I talk about the strife and all of the hardships, but when I finish, I always talk about 'In Our Backyard'. People just melt when they hear the story. They are starting to change their view of homelessness with this project. The conversation is changing," Paddick said.

In Our Backyard aims to build a program where all client's needs are met.

"The reality is that all of us, at some point in our lives, have had a person who has made a big difference in our lives," Walsh said.

"This is about trying to pull that empathy into the situation with no judgement, and giving them that opportunity to try again. We are not here to judge. We are here to provide an opportunity to move forward."



This story was made possible by our Community Leaders Program partner.

Thank you to [Dignity Memorial \(Cambridge\)](#) for helping to expand local news coverage in Cambridge. [Learn more](#)

Comments (0)

We welcome your feedback and encourage you to share your thoughts. We ask that you be respectful of others and their points of view, refrain from personal attacks and stay on topic. To learn about our commenting policies and how we moderate, please read our [Community Guidelines](#).