

**MAINTENANCE**

# A 'fair' shot at a second chance

How Fairhaven Lawn Care, a social enterprise business, turns the homeless into skilled, productive employees. *By JONATHAN KATZ*

In 2008, Fairhaven Lawn Care began operating in central Ohio with a modest goal to serve about a dozen customers. Today, the company provides landscape maintenance services to approximately 45 customers. But Fairhaven isn't your typical landscape success story. Based in Lancaster, Ohio, about 30 miles southeast of Columbus, Fairhaven is a social enterprise business launched by Lutheran Social Services of Central Ohio to help its homeless clients.

The company currently employs a crew of five workers from the agency's shelter. Fairhaven is the brainchild of Eddie Rapp, director of the company and Lutheran Social Services. Rapp decided that instead of using outside contractors to manage landscaping services for Lutheran Social Services' properties, he would hire clients to do the work.

"We're kind of building their lives back up, but at the same time producing a product and a business," Rapp says.

Fairhaven is a for-profit business under the umbrella of the nonprofit agency. This means any profits are invested back into the agency's nonprofit programs. After Rapp decided to start the company, he hired an experienced landscape professional to supervise and train the staff. Prospective employees endure multiple rounds of interviews and background checks before they're hired. Once they're hired, the company spends 10 to 20 hours training each employee on all pieces of equipment, Rapp says.

While the company's challenges are somewhat unique, the basic tenets of success remain the same: present an appealing image with a strong marketing message and quality service.

"The perception of homeless people is not good, so the first two-and-a-half years we were trying to prove ourselves," Rapp recalls. "After a while, people would drive by a property and see our truck and trailer and say, 'Wow, that looks great.' Plus, there's the selling point of this business being a way to give back."

Performing a charitable service without requesting donations is another selling point for the company, Rapp says. People don't have to wonder where their money is going. "A lot of people are hesitant to donate to charities," Rapp says. "They want to know where their \$100 is going. We can tell them that if they don't want to donate \$100, then hire us."

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About 80 percent of Fairhaven's customers are commercial properties. The remaining sites are residential properties.

## THE SCREENING PROCESS

The employees who work on these properties come from various backgrounds. Some Fairhaven Lawn Care workers are former factory employees who were laid off during the recession. Other crew members are younger employees with limited job skills. Many Lutheran Social Services clients struggle with drug and mental health problems as well.

The company interviews all applicants from the Lutheran Social Services homeless shelter. The process serves the dual purpose of teaching the program clients interviewing skills while assessing their qualifications. Clients who pass the initial interview earn a follow-up meeting. Once they receive a job offer, Fairhaven conducts a final interview and

then performs a background check and drug testing, Rapp says. "We run it as an official business, and part of the rationale behind that is we want employees to hopefully in six months or so leave and go to a better job, and we want to teach them the skills."

Lutheran Social Services continues to work with clients who don't get the job so they can improve interviewing skills, resumes or other job search skills for future employment.

## AN EARLY START

Employees who make the cut will start working for Fairhaven as early as late February or the beginning of March. Unlike traditional landscape contractors in its area that typically begin working



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in April, Fairhaven starts earlier to ease new employees into the rigorous work environment. The new hires may work 10 to 20 hours the first few months before progressing to a full 40- to 50-hour workweek.

During the training process, workers learn how to operate zero-turn mowers, trimmers, edgers and equipment. They also learn how to trim shrubs and identify perennials and annuals. At the same time, the company teaches employees many basic life skills, such as managing their finances after they're paid.

Fairhaven employees may work for the company for up to a year before they're expected to find work elsewhere. About 10 to 15 former Fairhaven employees have moved on to larger landscape companies. Two ex-employees returned to school to earn turf management degrees. Fairhaven even has referred employees to competing landscape contractors, Rapp says.

Other employees have taken jobs at large retail outlets, such as Home Depot and Lowe's, or supervisory positions at restaurants, such as Subway. As for the company's overall success, Rapp says Fairhaven has made just enough to recoup its capital investments. In the next two years, he expects to be more profitable. But the company's goal is to serve a greater purpose that looks far beyond profitability, Rapp notes.

"Being a social enterprise, our goal is to employ as many of our clients as we can," Rapp says. "We don't want to lose money, but we're not in it to be a huge, booming business. If we can employ our clients and teach them the skills they need and move them on, that's our ultimate social goal."

*Katz is a freelance writer based in Cleveland.*



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