

Project Opportunity – A Unique and Successful Program for Veteran-Owned Small Businesses and Vetpreneurs Comes to TechPort

With the unemployment rate among veterans in Maryland hovering between 14 and 18 percent in 2010, Joe Giordano decided to do something about it. He understands how tough the transition from military life to civilian life can be. Sometimes traditional employment just isn't the right fit after leaving the service.

A retired master sergeant with 20 years in the U.S. Army and 17 years as owner of Consulting, Training and Development Services, Giordano wanted to tackle the challenges of unemployment among veterans and introduce them to the possibility of starting their own veteran-owned small business, like he did. He founded Project Opportunity, a free entrepreneurship training program designed solely for veterans, active duty or reserve personnel who want to start or expand their own business.

Since then, some 270 veterans have completed and graduated from the 30-hour training course. He knows of at least 88 who have registered their business with the Maryland Department of Business and Taxation. From those Project Opportunity graduates, at least 225 jobs have been created. Giordano sends a survey every year to graduates of his course, but he doesn't always hear back, making exact tracking difficult.

"I haven't run across any graduates that aren't running their own business or employed," Giordano says.

Giordano, a Salisbury, Maryland resident, began offering the course on the Eastern Shore. It has expanded to Southern Maryland, Baltimore City, Howard County, Prince George's County, Anne Arundel County and next spring will also be offered in Harford County. The class meets for three hours, one night each week for 10 weeks. A session is currently being held at TechPort.

"It's a fantastic opportunity to get more entrepreneurs working in our Southern Maryland counties," says Tommy Luginbill, director of TechPort. "It's incredible the talent that Giordano brings to teach participants all they need to know to get their business off the ground and running."

Project Opportunity uses a nationally recognized entrepreneurship curriculum called NXLevel and Giordano supplements with subject matter experts presenting weekly. They cover market research and analysis, credit for small businesses, legal aspects of business entities, basic aspects of salesmanship, commercial insurance and web design. Additionally, he brings in someone to introduce local resources and a small business administrator.

"We teach our participants how to research, write and develop a comprehensive business plan," Giordano says. "At the end of the course, we offer review sessions with experts in

marketing and financial fields. They review their business plans and offer 15-20 minutes of feedback.”

The course concludes with a three- to five-minute PowerPoint business pitch and an opportunity to share what they’ve learned in the course.

“After graduation, we continue to offer free business counseling and coaching,” Giordano says.

The class size usually ranges from about six to 14 people. With social distancing in place due to the pandemic, they are currently a bit smaller. Four classes are underway this fall on the Eastern Shore, in Southern Maryland, Prince George’s County and Baltimore City, with some classes and speakers participating virtually.

With the economic troubles created by the novel coronavirus, Giordano sees this as a great time for veterans to try Project Opportunity.

“There may be veterans who want to start a business or who are struggling and want to expand to recover from COVID-19. Some may already have a business plan and they need to update or revise it,” Giordano says.

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