

## Military vets get boost from IDA to aid new businesses

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NEW WINDSOR – Eric Noll spent five years confused till this spring. Sure, the former U.S. Army drill sergeant and infantryman felt that various private, federal, state and local government agencies wanted to help the military veteran's leatherworking business succeed.

Yet, business questions kept swirling in his mind about which programs to use and how to use them to help his Cornwall business, the Elizabeth Collection, keep customizing boots, belts, wallets and purses.

And what Noll, a 20-year service member till 2012, really needed was help with, well, everything. A business plan? Budgeting? Cheaper rent? Check, check and check.

All that was the case till he recently connected with the Orange County Industrial Agency's Accelerator program, which incubates new businesses and speeds up the growth of nascent firms.

Now, Noll is among at least five military active duty and veteran-owned businesses working with the IDA, a nonprofit public benefit corporation that also considers tax breaks to stimulate local development.

Local business-owning veterans said the Accelerator guides them through the alphabet soup of acronyms for governmental and private programs, agencies and grants to help grow their companies.

Last year, Noll, 45, and his fiancée, Elizabeth Moore, sold \$17,000 of their leather products directly to consumers at their tiny Cornwall shop. But after recently moving into the Accelerator's Newburgh satellite, Accelerator staff

helped them network and advised them to pivot to a more promising business-to-business approach.

“There’s nothing like that with what the Accelerator is doing, saying ‘We’ll help you, we’ll pick you up,’” Noll said. “Without them, we wouldn’t be here. We’d still be in Cornwall trying to make ends meet.”

### **Help & hand-holding**

The Accelerator didn’t set out to help local veterans, said Vincent Cozzolino, managing director of the Orange County IDA and its Accelerator, and Laurie Villasuso, who serves as chief operating officer of both.

But, “In general, there are some qualities that come out in individuals who’ve served in armed services” that made their companies attractive, Villasuso said. “They tend to be disciplined, and have structure, and have plans and want to see them through.”

New Accelerator business owner Jim Meineker, 67, co-owner of the high-end lighting fixture business M and M Specialty Enterprises, said he served in the Coast Guard from 1969 to 1973, “when ships were wooden and men were iron.”

The Coast Guard, Meineker said, made him “much more disciplined, much more understanding of how things work.”

The electronics service technician, who rose to lead field engineer and national product expert for medical imaging device maker Carestream Health before his retirement, thought his lighting fixture company would “just be for fun.”

But the Accelerator, Meineker said, has made him “more results-oriented,” as he and Mayhew seek to launch their new business. Together, they craft custom home lighting designs, from LED bulbs programmed to flash in patterns inside Jack Daniels bottles to river tables, ornate wood slabs with back-lit “river-like” epoxy patterns down the middle.

For Drone Tech UAS CEO Tony Reid, the Accelerator is all about “holding your hand to keep you focused.”

Reid, currently a sergeant in the New York Army National Guard, said he’s fast

adding accounts to his three-employee business offering drone training and helping companies use drones for security and medical supply-delivery purposes.

Reid's company is minority-owned, another focus of the Accelerator along with businesses owned by women, both of which constitute most of the firms assisted.

### **Money well spent?**

All the veteran-owned businesses are one- to three-employee firms with less than \$100,000 of annual sales. That's also the case for several of the 30 businesses the Accelerator is currently helping in the agency's Newburgh fashion cluster, Warwick Cannabidiol or CBD Cluster, and the Middletown Personal Care Products and Medical Devices Cluster.

The Accelerator money to assist them comes from the fees, now an \$11 million pot, the IDA has collected from businesses applying to be considered for tax breaks and other incentives for development projects.

When it comes to wisely spending the Accelerator's roughly \$2 million annual budget, Villasuso has acknowledged the incubator lost its way between its 2009 inception and its July 2015 rebranding.

She and Cozzolino have previously conceded that, before they took leadership roles in 2015 and 2016 respectively, the Accelerator let businesses pay below-market rent to mull products indefinitely without enough oversight.

Now, the Accelerator more carefully monitors businesses, giving them a three-year window to grow with assistance, and the agency's staff estimates they'll have helped create 168 jobs between 2015 and this December. Among them are 20 at Ziel On Demand Activewear of Newburgh and 21 at handbag and accessory maker Melo of New Windsor.

So, is the Accelerator worth it at an average cost of \$12,600 per job created since 2015? Cozzolino and Villasuso say organically growing giant local companies with hundreds or thousands of jobs is a rare, difficulty feat nowadays. They're satisfied fostering small and medium-sized businesses, which make up the majority of America's workforce.

Former Air Force Capt. Tierra Oliver, 35, is thrilled to be among the

entrepreneurs the Accelerating is assisting. As a nurse practitioner and mother seeking a natural eczema treatment for her young daughter, Taylor, Oliver invented Eczesoothe, a salve with organic coco butter, herbs and cucumber water.

“I think it’s fantastic the Accelerator is helping veterans and women and minorities,” Oliver said. “For me, the Accelerator has provided information, and given me more passion, purpose and structure. I wouldn’t be able to afford to do this without them.”

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