

# outbursts

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## Grant aims to retrain laid-off workers

*Office of Economic Development helps strengthen colleges and workforce boards in region*

By Andrea Brunais

In January, Southwest Virginia celebrated that the U.S. Department of Labor had provided almost \$2 million to the community college system in Virginia. The grant is designed for laid-off workers in the coalfields region who need retraining and help finding jobs.

The story stayed in the headlines for a day. But the plan is to be carried out over months and years. During that time, Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development will work closely with the workforce boards and community colleges largely responsible for carrying out the intervention.

The unemployed workers and even their families, including spouses who may be re-entering the workforce, are expected to benefit from work carried out under the grant.

Economic development specialists also will pay calls on employers in the region, helping them to understand that a laid-off coal miner may possess skills useful to the business's bottom line, according to John Provo, the office's director.

"Some of our work will involve actually doing employer visits," he says. "We may be able to open their eyes to the possibility of hiring these workers, especially employers like machine shops or the smaller manufacturers."

Last year, the Office of Economic



*In Season Two, Episode 3, of the the internet series Save Our Towns, Raymond Comer, a former coal miner who now gives tours of an exhibition coal mine in Pocahontas, Va., shared the challenges, as well as the joys, of his life's work.*

Development completed a study – commissioned by the Southwest Virginia Workforce Investment Board – showing that many coal industry workers possess skills in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and math.

"These competencies are highly compatible with many manufacturing jobs in areas such as the manufacturing of plastics, rubber and metals," says Scott Tate, senior economic development specialist and the study's primary author. "Other relevant fields include recycling and biomass as well as advanced machining."

The office also plans to play a key role in identifying problems associated with the layoffs and suggesting solutions, Provo says. Case in point: a new and growing need for child-care services in the region.

"A worker could be commanding a six-figure salary at the time of layoff," he says.

"Even if that person finds new employment, the salary is liable to be much smaller. What that might mean for these families is that they must become a two-income family. They can no longer afford to have one member of the household stay home with the children."

The project follows a series of coal-company layoffs and closings across Southwest Virginia in which more than 1,500 workers lost jobs. Under the Department of Labor grant, the Office of Economic Development will play a crucial role in restructuring the economy to accommodate those workers.

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The office is instrumental in bringing together all of a community's stakeholders, including community colleges, workforce boards, employers and other organizations in both the public and private sectors. "There are a lot of players in workforce development," Tate says.

The workforce boards are the Southwest Virginia Workforce Development Board headquartered in Lebanon and the New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board in Radford.

The two community colleges most closely involved in the project will be Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap and Southwest Virginia Community College in Cedar Bluff.

The colleges are expected to expand their training programs in targeted subject

matters such as welding, advanced machining, entrepreneurship and outdoor recreation, giving workers "amazing career opportunities," says Virginia Secretary of Education Anne Holton in a January news release.



A similar effort took place under a U.S. Department of Labor grant in 2010

when a Virginia Tech-led team of almost 20 partners won \$3.8 million in federal stimulus money to train workers for new, green jobs in the construction industry. Under that grant, the Office of Economic Development worked alongside Virginia

Tech faculty to help three community colleges develop a "green curriculum" in communities hard hit by job losses.

The new grant, in force through July 2018, is part of a series underwritten by the U.S. Department of Labor in partnership with the U.S. Department of Commerce, the Small Business Administration and the Appalachian Regional Commission. The money is intended to help communities and workers successfully adapt to changes in the coal industry and power sector, according to the Labor Department.

# Entrepreneurs get boost from innovation grant

Virginia Tech receives grant from U.S. Department of Commerce to boost regional entrepreneurial efforts

By Keith Pierce and Susan Bland

From funding prototypes to reducing risk, entrepreneurs face common roadblocks when taking an idea or business from invention to market. With a \$499,751 grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce – one of 25 grants created to advance capacity building and entrepreneurial efforts – Virginia Tech's Catalyst Program will expand to help provide a new path to technology, innovation and job creation for entrepreneurs in the region.

Access to early-stage funds is not a problem in the region, says John Provo, who heads Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development. But resources are needed to cover three things:

- seek promising technologies
- minimize risks
- put entrepreneurs on a path to market

"The Virginia Tech Catalyst program fosters collaboration between innovators and entrepreneurs. Together, they will address challenges in moving research to the private market while securing necessary investments with an eye toward job creation," Provo says.

As a major economic hub for the region, Virginia Tech is well positioned to support startup growth, help students advance their innovative and entrepreneurial ideas into reality, and boost the economy in Roanoke and Blacksburg, U.S. Sen. Mark Warner said in a news release.

"I'm pleased that Virginia Tech has been selected for this funding to support faculty and student entrepreneurs, encourage innovation and help create good-paying, 21st-century jobs," Warner says.

The Catalyst program is a collaboration between the Office of Economic Development, the Apex Systems Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, the Office of Research and Innovation and the Institute for Creativity,

*Pamplin College of Business students, Brett Langstaff and Allison Howe, sit with Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe during his visit to inVenTs Residential Community and Apex Systems Center for Innovation and Entrepreneurship last October.*

Arts, and Technology at Virginia Tech. The project will include undergraduates from all colleges who are working on next-generation concepts, along with university faculty members and industry affiliates offering technical support and identifying business opportunities.

A regional advisory committee of university, community and industry partners supports the Catalyst program. Partners include the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council, the Center for Innovative Technology, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the New River Valley Regional Commission, the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, the New River Valley Economic Development Alliance, Rackspace Hosting and Cambrian Design.



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