



Rural Business Technical Assistance Exchange 2023

The Covid-19 pandemic not only presented severe challenges for the business community in Vermont but also highlighted systemic issues that prevent future business growth even under normal circumstances. These challenges are magnified for small businesses in rural Vermont and for small businesses owned by historically underserved populations, such as BIPOC, women, LGBTQ+, veteran, and handicapped.

The Regional Development Corporations of Vermont (RDCs) propose the following solution: **The Rural Business Technical Assistance Exchange**. The Exchange is an initiative modeled after the very successful ReVTA (Restart Vermont Technical Assistance) grant program, which was created and administered by the RDCs of Vermont and funded by the Cares Act and continued under the SBA-funded Community Navigator Pilot Program. From these programs, the RDC's now have the infrastructure, expertise, and experience in place to operate the program. More importantly, we have an existing, robust inventory of Vermont technical assistance providers who have demonstrated the ability and expertise to assist small and mid-sized businesses with critical tools to grow and adapt their businesses to the everchanging business climate. The expertise includes professionals such as attorneys, CPAs, architects, engineers, and other professional services and highly qualified providers in information technology, digital strategies, business operations, financial management, hospitality, marketing, photography, video production and grant writing.

The Rural Business Technical Assistance Exchange will produce benefits for both the client companies as well as the vendors providing the assistance. It will also expand the capabilities of RDC's to serve an even larger portion of our rural business community, including historically underserved populations.

The Exchange will require a \$1,250,000 appropriation, which could be administered through the Agency of Commerce and Community Development and allocated to the RDCs. The funds will serve two functions: first, to partially fund in-house RDC staff to effectively execute the program, act as Business Navigators and cover administrative costs; and secondly, to provide technical assistance grants that are paid directly to the technical assistance providers on behalf of applicant businesses. Much like the Vermont Training Program, applicant businesses will be required to provide a 50% match to help cover the cost of the technical assistance. We recommend grants ranging from \$3,000-\$5,000. Status reports will be provided to the Vermont Department of Economic Development twice yearly.

The Exchange would provide a clear message from the state that regardless of size, location, or ownership, all businesses are welcomed and supported by Vermont. It is an investment in our economic future and will strengthen our business community and provide them with the assistance they need to grow and remain resilient.

Allocation of funds:

\$680,000:	For approximately 230 TA grants to VT Rural Small Businesses
\$360,000:	To 6 RDCs to provide regional business navigator services
\$80,000:	For a vendor navigator position at RDC
\$80,000	For program administrator position at RDC

Restart Vermont Technical Assistance (ReVTA) and CNPP

How it Worked

When COVID-19 hit, businesses and organizations were scrambling to adapt to a new virtual and contactless world. In response to the changing economy, the **Regional Development Corporations of Vermont (RDCs)** worked quickly to launch the ReVTA program: designed to deliver critically important technical assistance to hundreds of businesses and organizations to adapt business practices, retrofit space and access new technologies. RDCs leveraged over \$2.1 million in CARES act funds, Small Business Association Community Navigator Pilot Program funds, and funding by the Community Development Block Grants to connect **small businesses and non-profits with technical assistance providers**. The results have been overwhelmingly positive and the network of businesses and vendors will create lasting economic opportunity as our economy recovers from COVID-19.



Navigators from the RDCs helped businesses assess need and identify vendor partners



830 businesses joined the program and received help from navigators

583 businesses have hired vendors. Of them:



288 are women-owned



195 are owned by people over age 55



31 are owned by those not U.S.-born



16 are owned by people with disabilities



17 are veteran-owned



54 are owned by people of color



These businesses employ a total of more than **3,539** people.



361 businesses signed on to provide technical assistance through the RDC programs. Of **229** who have formed partnerships through the program:



91 are women-owned



68 are owned by people over age 55



6 are owned by those not U.S.-born



3 are owned by people with disabilities



6 are veteran-owned



4 are owned by people of color

Sample Partnerships and Testimonials

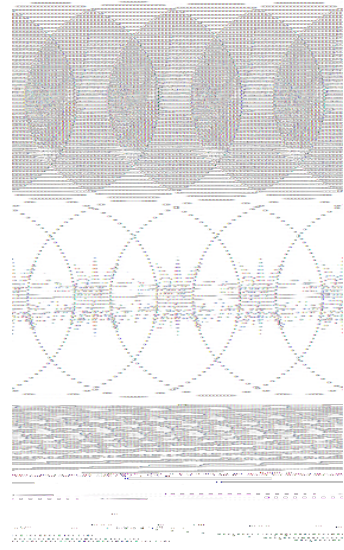
Storymatic + eBizVisibility

Brian Mooney, a teacher and writer has found an amazing way of connecting his two passions into a lot of fun. Storymatic games tap into your imagination and get your creative juices flowing. Mooney runs his shop out of the Cotton Mill in Brattleboro. Before the ReVTA program hooked him up with eBizVisibility, Storymatic had seen a drop in sales of 15 percent. With search engine optimization and other technical marketing help, Mooney was able to change his website to help more story-minded people find his products. Storymatic is seeing sales 45 percent above the same timeframe last year.



Everlasting Herb Farm + The Idea Midwife

Wendy Mackenzie's Everlasting Herb Farm in Peacham has brought many beautiful personal care products to the Vermont Country Store in an exclusive sales relationship. She now works to focus her line specifically on natural deodorants which she manufactures and sells online and in stores. Wendy worked with business coach Laura Lind-Blum of The Idea Midwife to chart out multiple pathways for growth. They discussed reaching \$200K of sales, and created projected sales to reach other goals such as a full- or part-time employee at different hourly rates.



Lyndon Area Chamber of Commerce + Northeast Kingdom Online

The COVID pandemic and ongoing recovery has simultaneously reduced the Lyndon Area Chamber of Commerce's revenue streams, while making their role in the community more important than ever. The Chamber, forced to cancel all events and miss out on revenue, feared they would likely see lower-than-projected membership renewal, too. At the same time, businesses and community members were looking to the Chamber for guidance on the shifting regulations and available recovery support. Northeast Kingdom Online was able to help the Chamber upgrade their website so businesses could leverage the Chamber's reach to drive traffic safely back to them.



Barre Opera House + Eternity Marketing

The theater and music industry in Vermont has been hit particularly hard by COVID-19. Barre Opera House lost a significant percent of their memberships, donations, ticket sales and sponsors as in-person events came to a complete halt. The venue hoped to be better positioned when in-person events become feasible again. They also needed and to promote remote options and classes. Eternity Marketing helped the non-profit with planning, strategy and initial ad design for a Google Ad campaign that could create future sales to make up for the losses due to COVID.



"We will be in a better position in 2021 than pre-pandemic... the TA program helped me do things I simply could not do on my own... a very successful program and a good use of State funds. I encourage its return, because I think it can help a lot of people."

Brian Mooney, President, Storymatic



"Working as a vendor with the ReVTA program was an amazing experience and outcome for Eternity. The navigators were friendly and helpful every step of the way. Many of the projects have also now turned into recurring revenue streams."

Mike Lannen, Eternity Marketing