

BUSINESS

Startup incubator aims to help veterans, military members chart own course

Bunker Labs, WeWork team up to offer networking, support services



Photo courtesy of Bunker Labs

Bunker Labs, a nonprofit, has teamed up with WeWork on a business program aimed at veterans and military service members.

By **JUDITH KOHLER** | jkohler@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
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It's never easy starting your own business, to say nothing of trying it in the middle of a global pandemic. But a program that helps members of the military and veterans pursue their entrepreneurial dreams is moving ahead with its next session, whether that's in person or online.

The Veterans in Residence program is scheduled to kick off July 1.

[Applications](#) are being taken until Sunday. The program is a partnership between WeWork and [Bunker Labs](#), a national nonprofit organization that works with the military community, including military spouses and National Guard members, on starting their own businesses.

Denver is one of several cities across the country that is home to the startup incubators. The program provides a workspace in Lower Downtown Denver and a network to support people as they come up with ideas for an enterprise and work to build it, Dan Biga, the regional executive director for Bunker Labs, said.

“We have in-person events at our local chapters and then we also have a virtual presence and that virtual presence has definitely increased during the COVID-19 situation,” Biga said.

Besides the usual six-month business incubator program, Bunker Labs has started a campaign called [#All_in](#) to help business people survive the coronavirus pandemic. The campaign is offering help on tapping the federal money available to businesses and weekly town halls with business leaders.

“Entrepreneurship enables people to take their destiny in their own hands and I think a lot of people are experiencing the uncertainty associated with being at the calling of the others,” Biga said. “So entrepreneurship is definitely a viable path for people in this moment.”

About 25% of people who leave the service want to start their own business, but only 4.5% actually do, Biga said. After World War II, 50% of veterans started businesses, he said.

“Veterans and military staff are uniquely positioned, based upon their experiences, to thrive in entrepreneurship,” Biga said. “A lot of transitioning service members and military spouses simply don’t have the network they need to succeed.”



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David Emanuel said he was on a path he hoped would lead to becoming an astronaut when an illness “turned my life upside down.” He graduated from the Air Force Academy in 2016. He was just 24 when the Air Force gave him a medical retirement.

Emanuel was freelancing, putting his science and analytical skills to work when he won a spot in one of the Bunker Labs’ six-month sessions in 2019. He was asked to return to be an alumni captain, a kind of mentor, for the next class.

The experience has been an accelerant for his business, Emanuel said. He started Ujima Digital, which analyzes customer data for companies. He has two business partners and works with four contractors.

“When I first got started I was a freelancer,” Emanuel said. “It was just me and my thoughts and working out of various coffee shops and libraries.”

When he was accepted into the Bunker Labs program, Emanuel joined other vets in space in LoDo provided by WeWork, the real estate and workspace-sharing company.

“They’ve given us access to all of their amenities,” Emanuel said. “We have all the internet connectivity you could ever need.”

And there are plenty of opportunities to network with other people dealing with the same issues and people who are further along, Emanuel said.

“Just being in that petri dish of entrepreneurship and the downtown Denver tech ecosystem, I’ve learned so many things,” Emanuel said.

To learn more about the Veterans in Residence program, go to:
<https://bunkerlabs.org/our-programs/veterans-in-residence/>

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Judith Kohler

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