



## Engaging Returning Citizens to “Aspire and THRIVE” on Virginia’s Northern Neck

The Artisans Center of Virginia’s (ACV) Transforming Healthy, Responsively Involved, Viable Entrepreneurs (THRIVE) program seeks to identify gaps and provide business assistance, training and resources for entrepreneurial, small businesses and industry level enterprises. Focused on providing service to the returning citizen population (formerly incarcerated individuals, non-violent ex-offenders) in Virginia’s Northern Neck, “Aspire and THRIVE” will work in partnership with the Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC). ***ACV’s “Aspire and THRIVE” will identify and engage individuals in supportive, innovative programming to instill a sense of “reentry with purpose” through entrepreneurial business development.*** The ACV and NNPDC bring to the project a team of local and state service providers and referring partner agencies and educational institutions, which, paired with a capitalized small business loan program, provide a program that will be quickly deployable throughout the region.

ACV provides demonstrable service to entrepreneurs across the Commonwealth through its flagship community and economic development initiatives: the Artisan Trail Network and Virginia Oyster Trail. In addition, ACV provides entrepreneur workshops, seminars and conferences for local organizations, community colleges and universities statewide. The program is led by Sherri L. Smith, Executive Director, of the Artisans Center of Virginia, and Jerry W. Davis, AICP, Executive Director of the Northern Neck Planning District Commission, who collectively bring over 35 years of experience in the areas of business development, state, regional and local government and community leadership. In addition to supporting ACV and NNPDC staff, ACV has developed a team of set-aside eligible small businesses who have been providing integrated solutions by aligning value chain strategy and operations to support business objectives since 2003. Additional regional resource partner and referral organizations will include: Rappahannock Community College Workforce Development's Office of Career and Transition Services; Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (Northern Neck Division) and the Virginia Department of Corrections Office of Probation and Parole, District #33.

With a “trusted-advisor” peer invigorated foundation to include the current, established Northern Neck Artisan Trail Management Team and strong working relationship with the region’s Planning District Commission, this collective will work together to execute the program utilizing sound operating plans, tailored training and education, and appropriate technology, supported by research and policy initiatives. Invoking a collaborative approach, the team strives to promote economic development and drive integrated solutions across networks that are strategic as well as practical, cost effective and focused on measurable improvements.

To reduce recidivism rates, the program partners recognize that many returning citizens have a very hard time on the outside after serving their sentences. Current Reentry Programming does not necessarily cover the aspiring entrepreneurs within or recently released from the system. While these programs are effective and cover the needs of many offenders (such as high school education/GED programs, and job skills training for primarily manual labor fields) they do not necessarily foster the

ability and business management skills of entrepreneurs. ***“Aspire and THRIVE” is an innovative synergistic complement to services provided through rehabilitated programming that recognizes the self-empowerment energy that can be sparked through self-employment and entrepreneur creativity.*** Understanding the reality facing these participants to develop healthy life skill habits as they set personal plans for positive change, the integration of underpinning life skills such as budgeting, time management, parenting and family dynamics will be integrated into the business development curriculum.

As these individuals look to re-start and adjust to life in community, fundamental to the program is the establishment of a team learning environment that encourages practical interaction as business concepts are presented in experiential ways. Skills assessment, business planning, formation and technical assistance in addition to access to resources on the local, regional and federal levels such capital through micro-funding and small business loans, are core to the curriculum. Not only will business development as a discipline be presented, the goal is to introduce support mechanisms as applicable in an effort to burgeon new entrepreneurial businesses in Virginia’s Northern Neck.

A core value of the program is based on a one-to-one premise of “Helping Businesses Help Themselves.” “Aspire and THRIVE” will not sugar coat what it takes to create and operate a successful business, however through its highly motivational delivery of programming, participants will be guided to invoke their passion and determination to develop their skills and knowledge and strengthen their resolve.

#### **REGIONAL NEED**

The current caseload for Probation and Parole District # 33 which serves the Northern Neck of Virginia is 480. “Aspire and THRIVE” will work with the local district to identify program participants and initially seek to engage 10 – 30 individuals. The program is open to all formerly incarcerated individuals and the non-violent ex-offender from Virginia’s Northern Neck region regardless of sex, race or creed, and at the recommendation of local caseworkers, special consideration will be given to female and younger adult releases who find themselves with a history having not realized the barriers and impact their offense has on their job/future goals. (The female SR Release population in Virginia is growing. There were 236 more female offenders released from an SR term of incarceration in FY2015 than there were in FY2011, representing an increase of 17%. [https://vadoc.virginia.gov/about/facts/research/new-statsum/offenderpopulationtrends\\_fy11-fy15Female.pdf](https://vadoc.virginia.gov/about/facts/research/new-statsum/offenderpopulationtrends_fy11-fy15Female.pdf)).

#### **REGIONAL DESCRIPTION AND PARTNERSHIP**

The Northern Neck Planning District Commission (NNPDC) covers the four rural counties of Westmoreland, Richmond, Lancaster and Northumberland. With a combined population of just under 50,000 (2015 population estimate: <https://data.virginialmi.com>), the region is sparsely populated. The peninsula, bounded by the Potomac River to the North, the Rappahannock River to the South, and Chesapeake Bay to the East is dotted with farms and forests. There are six incorporated towns in the area. There are few large (100+ employees) employers in the region, and tourism and retirement figure prominently in the economic development landscape, along with traditional industries such as agriculture, timber and seafood. Access to the area historically was by steamboat, and now two bridges and one arterial 2-lane highway (Route 3) connect the region to its neighbors. Given the isolation and historical significance of the region, including early presidential birthplaces, together with King George County, the Northern Neck is currently being studied by the National Park Service to determine if it meets the criteria to be designated a “National Heritage Area.”

The region has been recognized by the Department of Commerce as an Economic Development District since 1999, and formed an economic development partnership, the Northern Neck Chesapeake Bay

Region Partnership. In 2012 the region was selected to participate in the Strengthening Economies Together Program and the resulting economic development plan was designated a 'High-Quality Plan'. NNPDC leveraged the progress of the SET program, and in subsequent years, was awarded two Building Collaborative Communities grants, a Building Entrepreneurial Economies grant, and three USDA grants – all related to rural economic development, business incubation, access to capital, and industry-cluster focus.

Like many rural localities, the region suffers from workforce-age population leakage, and a declining population generally. The waterfront around the region and natural and historic assets, make the region attractive as a retirement community, and healthcare-related, or home-care, small businesses have emerged to answer the demand of this community for additional services. There are parts of the region that have little access to healthcare (more than 40 minutes to nearest hospital) and those areas struggle to retain the retirees they manage to attract! In an atmosphere of declining school-age populations, the region must find new effective ways to retain, educate and employ the youth population of the area.

**In addressing the economic challenges of the region through the Northern Neck Economic Development Plan, the Northern Neck engaged the Artisans Center of Virginia to assist them in a project under Goal 4 (Promote and protect effective and sustainable use of the region's natural beauty, cultural amenities, and tourism opportunities), Objective A (Encourage local economic activity through branding & marketing), Action 2 (Create a Northern Neck food trail). This grant synergizes the existing working relationship with the Artisans Center of Virginia, whose staff is already familiar with the Northern Neck. This application seeks to leverage ACV's capacity to address another goal in the Northern Neck Economic Development Plan: Goal 3 (Establish a business-friendly environment), Objective A (Deliver training and resources to support existing small businesses and potential entrepreneurs) with specific outreach to formerly incarcerated individuals and the non-violent ex-offenders who reside in the region.**

## **LEARNING METHODOLOGY & PLAN**

Viewing personal growth as a life-long process of questioning and discovery, ACV helps individuals and businesses realize their unique talent assets; translate vision into action; and, build distinctive business platforms to pursue and sustain the work they love. Programming is dedicated to the establishment of trust-based business cultures and the expansions of entrepreneurship, community collaborations, creative pursuits, and re-thinking education. The approach utilizes practical skill-based scope and sequence develop innovative strategies, brand positioning, dynamic messaging, market responsiveness, and strategic partnerships & joint ventures for success.

The ACV's Virginia's Entrepreneur Framework utilizes an experiential learning-based curriculum that integrates sound business practicum, incremental topic delivery, one-to-one coaching/advisory services and skill-based mentor facilitations with peer-to-peer interaction and assessment to drive concept understanding in an applied learning format.

ACV's instructors are consultants, businesspeople, practitioners, and entrepreneurs and educators. From roundtable discussions to workshops to one-on-one sessions, the ACV team has defined and developed best practices. The curriculum focuses on all aspects of business critical to phase 1, start-up businesses. It covers the areas identified in published research as being critical to entrepreneurial success, including strategy, sales and marketing, financial literacy, financing, and operations (including negotiations, cost take-out and personnel management).

Although the program will be tailored to each participant's level of business start-up and entrepreneurial understanding, each will:

- assess their entrepreneurial strengths and weaknesses (owners & managers)
- identify business niches to determine where their vision fits (goals & objectives)
- define general operational requirements of their business model (products & services)
- assess the market and financial feasibility of business ideas (outreach & growth)
- prepare a business plan document (marketing plan, operational plan & financial plan)
- practice customer service skills (relationships & retention)
- prepare for implementing their plan (timelines & time management)
- develop a journal of available business support (resources & services).
- receive a certificate upon successful completion of the program.

Integrating these new entrepreneurs into the local business ecosystem is critical to their success and strengthening their social capital throughout the regional customer/supplier base and beyond. Additional effort will be made to “mentor-pair” participants with established, local entrepreneurs of a related industry or business as they begin their entrepreneurial journey. “Aspire and THRIVE” consistently encourages active community networking across the larger business ecosystem with established entrepreneurial groups, potential customers, distribution partners, strategic industry alignments through business to business connections, the use of online business forums and participation at relevant gatherings, conferences and seminars.

#### **ACCESS TO CAPITAL**

Access to capital is an aspect of the methodology that connects cohort members with external resources needed for growth. These resources include both funding resources (including grants and micro-loans) and strategic partners that can invest in the entrepreneurial growth as a direct investor or as an ecosystem and/or value chain partner. Local funding resources are the avenue of first resort and are normally quickly ruled out by most traditional lending institutions. Access to capital for previously incarcerated individuals offers distinct challenges. “Traditional” funding for most in this community many times originates from extended family loans and the sweat investment of relatives. This culture and its underrepresentation on financial statements (along with the incarceration record) presents challenges in communicating true value and potential to mainstream financial institutions.

ACV's team of experts is familiar with every avenue of funding, from loan and micro loan applications to presenting and supporting analytics for equity financiers and crowd-funding options. Through the team's extensive connections, the SBA 'Loans and Grants Search Tool,' ACV will work with each participant to identify and secure the external resources required to achieve their growth plan. One potential local fund established by the Northern Neck Planning District Commission in its commitment to providing financial incentives to local businesses is their Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) offering small, low interest rates and simple repayment terms for small businesses that support items like: site improvements, rehabilitation costs, purchases of fixtures, machinery, equipment and installation costs and inventory purchases. (<http://northernneck.us/access-to-capital/>).

With a combined knowledge of small business start-up/growth the ACV team and Northern Neck Planning Commission's experience brings a tailoring approach to each participant's financial needs. “Aspire and THRIVE” will build profiles of local, regional, and national financiers to best align specific culture and challenges to a set of potential capital partners. Finally, specific members of the ACV team have developed, specifically for ScaleUp, a Guide Book called “Non-Traditional Funding for Small Businesses” that will be used to further establish new avenues for investment in the region.