

Rural Entrepreneur Program Goes Statewide

It started in late 2006 as a way for Sandy Ratliff to make business support resources more accessible to the 23, mostly rural, Southwest Virginia counties in her territory. Today, it is Virginia's signature [business outreach](#) program in every part of the state.

Entrepreneur Express: Moving Your Business *Forward*, the program that Sandy developed out of her Abingdon office for the [Virginia Department of Business Assistance](#), is one of a number of successful economic development efforts that germinated in rural Virginia and quickly were planted in more populous areas. [Virginia Economic Bridge, Inc.](#) is another example of an initially rural program demonstrating more widespread applicability.

Piggybacking on a short-lived Small Business Administration Program, Sandy's vision was a partnership of local organizations—town and county government and business organizations like Chambers of Commerce—with all the myriad of local, regional, state, and Federal business resource providers. If the local side of the partnership would provide space and share promotional efforts, then she would bring the resource providers for a half to full day training and assistance session with the existing business community and citizens interested in starting a new business.

Buy-in from both sides of the partnership was swift and enthusiastic. Since late 2006, Sandy has conducted 25 events with impressive attendance in her rural territory—over 900. Reactions from attendees have almost been uniformly glowing, reflecting a deep appreciation of the effort of bring the resources to the users, rather than forcing each individual to search them out across a wide geography.

This testimonial sent to Sandy is typical: *I just came back to Lexington, from the workshop, and I cannot thank you enough. Everything was great!! : the presenters, their info, the atmosphere, everything! Thanks again for organizing it and for sharing all that valuable knowledge, resources and time with us.*

Success of the Entrepreneur Express concept in Southwest Virginia was obvious by the summer of 2007 and Wayne Waldrop, Sandy's boss and the Director of Business Information Services for the Virginia Department of Business Assistance, decided to see if the events would work outside of Southwest Virginia, in both rural and urban/suburban areas.

The first events in Southern Virginia and in Northern Virginia quickly proved that what worked in rural Virginia worked elsewhere. Entrepreneur Express events have now been held or scheduled in the Shenandoah Valley, the suburbs of Richmond, and in the fast-growing Fredericksburg area. A roll-out into the Hampton Roads area is expected later this year, with an event already held in Williamsburg indicating great interest in that region.

Meanwhile, Sandy Ratliff is not standing still. She is testing a [Business Fundamentals](#) workshop series to follow-up in an area after an Entrepreneur Express. Her test location, Lebanon in Russell County, has been a rousing success after just a few workshops, so much so that the sessions will be transmitted by video-conference to remote locations.

For the Virginia Department of Business Assistance and its many allies and partners, serving rural Virginia has inspired creativity and innovation that has benefited all regions of the Commonwealth.

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