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Resource Fair to offer guidance on starting, expanding a business

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star
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It's the American dream to start your own business, but many people don't know how to find the resources they'll need to turn their dream into reality.

The good news is, the guidance they seek is coming their way on July 29 with the free Winchester Business Resource Fair sponsored by the Hub for Innovators, Veterans and Entrepreneurs (HIVE) at Shenandoah University, People Inc. and the Winchester Economic Development Authority (EDA).

"A big assortment of different services are going to be there," Vanessa Santiago, deputy director of the Winchester EDA, said on Friday. "A little bit of everything."

Yolanda Shields, director of entrepreneurship at the HIVE, said the resource fair will provide helpful advice for people wanting to start or grow their own business, as well as those who have an idea for a business but aren't sure where to start.

"Some of the questions we get all the time are, 'Where are the resources? Who's doing what?'" Shields said. "There are resources in the [Shenandoah] Valley and we want them to realize what's there to support their entrepreneurship journey."

In just a few hours, Business Resource Fair attendees will be able to learn about funding, startup and growth opportunities; explore workforce and career development support services; network with entrepreneurs, professionals and community leaders; and discover tools and strategies to support their success.

"A lot of startups struggle with figuring out if there are monies out there for them to support what they're starting, or if they're actually ready for the money that's out there," Shields said. "There'll be some organizations there that provide training and boot camps for startups and existing businesses because the majority of them don't understand what it takes to even get started, and we want to be able to support them and do it."

The Business Resource Fair will also include exhibitors who can answer common questions like, "Will anybody buy my product?" and "How can I market this product or service?"

"They'll be able to connect with organizations that are going to be there and either go through one of their trainings or sit down with them one on one," Shields said.

"There is no cost to attend, and most of the participating organizations also provide free or low-cost assistance year-round," Santiago added. "This isn't a trade show where people are trying to sell you something. It's a room full of organizations whose mission is to help businesses succeed."

Some of the vendors who will be at the Winchester Business Resource Fair are Laurel Ridge Community College and its Small Business Development Center, the Top of Virginia Regional Chamber, Virginia Tourism Corp., the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership's InternshipsVA program, the financial services division of People Inc., the Virginia Small Business Financing Authority, the Virginia Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity, the Virginia Division of Rehabilitative Services, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, City National Bank, the Winchester-Frederick County Convention and Visitors Bureau, Virginia Works, FNB Bank and the Virginia Talent and Opportunity Partnership.

"All of these organizations that are being invited and attending are organizations we've all worked with, and I just think there's strength in collaboration," Shields said. "It's a benefit to all the small business owners and entrepreneurs."

The Winchester Business Resource Fair will be held from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the HIVE, 608 Millwood Ave., Winchester. Walk-ins will be welcome but anyone planning on attending the event is asked to register in advance at <https://bit.ly/4gKtIHu> so organizers will have an estimated head count. There is no charge to sign up or attend.

"Economic development isn't just about recruiting new businesses. It's also about supporting the businesses we already have and helping new ones get off the ground," Santiago said. "Strong small businesses create jobs, fill storefronts, increase local investment and contribute to a vibrant community."

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