

[By Jack Thurston](#)

Congressman Peter Welch, D-Vt., has hailed a Vermont business counseling and training program aimed at helping veterans start and manage their own businesses. Welch said at a press conference in Rutland Tuesday that he hopes the program will become a national model.

Welch pointed to success stories like Tim McCollum's as examples.

Before McCollum owned Eagle Eye Property Management in Killington, Vt., he wore the uniform of a Major in the Vermont National Guard and served three tours in Afghanistan.

When he got home, McCollum realized he could use his military skills and discipline to start a new career.

"Was I a maintenance guy in the Army? No," McCollum told New England Cable News. "But I was around it, so I understood that if you don't maintain things, they're going to break."

To launch into lawn maintenance, snow plowing, light construction and more, McCollum got help from a Vermont Guard program called Yellow Ribbon Reintegration. It teams with the Vermont Small Business Development Center to give returning troops technical assistance on business management topics including finding start-up money, marketing and, in McCollum's case, free accounting training.

NECN asked where McCollum would be without that advice.

"I'd probably be looking for a job right now," he answered.

Welch's amendment to the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act would require similar partnerships in every state, he said. He praised Rep. Chris Gibson, R-N.Y., for his bipartisan work on the legislation. It passed the U.S. House and is now awaiting a vote in the Senate, where Welch said he thinks it'll have support.

"In Vermont, we had on-the-ground leadership from the Guard, on-the-ground leadership from the Small Business Development Council, and we had the veterans who were willing to come forward and ask for the help," Rep. Welch explained. "So we had minimal bureaucracy here; it's all about getting the job done. Whether some of the bigger states would be able to overcome some of those bureaucratic challenges, I don't know. But let's give them a shot."

Welch said there has not yet been a dollar figure put on the implementation of the proposed national program. In Vermont, the Small Business Development Center's partnership with the Guard was largely funded with a grant from the U.S. Small Business Administration, a Vermont SBDC flyer read.

Welch said he hopes the concept could eventually bring down the unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans. U.S. Labor Department figures show the national number was around 12-percent last year: several points higher than the unemployment rate for non-veterans.

"A lot of them simply want to get a job and integrate back into the community," said Brian Perry with the Vt. National Guard Veterans Outreach Team. "And those are the people we try to help."

"Many people return and they want to do something different," added Linda Rossi of the Vermont Small Business Development Center. "There are resources in this state and in the other states to take advantage of."

Tim McCollum said Eagle Eye is signing up new clients weekly.

"We're past our break-even point," he noted.

McCollum may be in business for himself, but said he never felt he was by himself, thanks to the Vermont Small Business Development Center and the Vermont Guard's Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program.

"It's a good ride," McCollum said of owning his own business.

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