

[By Wilson Ring](#)

Vermont veterans seeking to create or expand small businesses now have access to office support services thanks to a business incubator set aside just for them in Randolph, officials said Monday.

The Vermont Tech Enterprise Center Business Incubator just off Interstate 89 provides the office space and equipment veterans need to do office work or have business meetings.

The space is free to use for veterans and service members who are starting or expanding a business in Vermont.

"It's not just about building jobs and the economy. That's really important. It's (also) about rebuilding lives," said U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, a Democrat who helped secure some of the funding to create the program.

Nationally, more than 200,000 people are discharged from the U.S. military each year. The U.S. Small Business Administration says nearly one in 10 small businesses is veteran-owned and that retired service members are at least 45 percent more likely than those without active-duty military experience to be self-employed.

U.S. Census Bureau numbers show there are 51,373 civilian veterans in Vermont, many of them adjusting after duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of those veterans are starting or expanding businesses.

"When they come home, especially in a rural community, those soldiers have that experience that was intense, it was powerful. They saw things we would hope no one would ever have to see. And they have to bear that burden alone," Welch said.

One of the veterans who will take advantage of the Randolph center is WillyJane Patry, 34, of Barre, still a member of the Vermont National Guard and a veteran of a year in Afghanistan. She is studying construction management at Vermont Tech, and she now runs a small real estate rental business.

"What I want to do is expand that," she said, noting she'd take advantage of the services the incubator is offering, although she didn't know just how yet. "It sounds like they have some good resources."

The space in an office building includes high-speed Internet service, copiers, meeting and conference rooms, video-conferencing and a hospitality area.

Welch said that in speaking with veterans he learned that a good job is a key part of getting them back into civilian life. They want to take the same skills that were so important to them on the battlefield and put them to use back home in Vermont.

"The whole notion of the small business development center with an emphasis to help vets was about empowering vets to be the best people that they can be," Welch said.