



GO Virginia Region 2 Projects Take Aim at COVID-19

A workforce training project dedicated to testing symptomatic patients and performing wide-scale surveillance testing is just one of the recent GO Virginia Region 2 approved projects working to address the COVID-19 pandemic. GO Virginia, a statewide initiative dedicated to creating high-wage jobs, developed the GO Virginia Economic Resilience and Recovery Program to specifically assist with the COVID-19 crisis, providing each of the nine regional councils with \$1.0 million in funding. So far, five Region 2 projects under this new program have been approved or endorsed by the Region 2 Council.

Due to the pressing need for COVID-19 testing in the Virginia, Virginia Tech Health Sciences and Technology developed a project to provide testing processing and workforce training in the New River Valley Health District, the Alleghany Health District, and the Roanoke City Health District.

The project received \$100,000 through a GOVA Economic Resilience and Recovery Fast Access Application, which enabled a Virginia Tech COVID-19 task force to launch the testing program and begin processing testing at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute and Fralin Life Sciences Institute. On June 23, the GOVA state board approved an additional \$500,000 for the project.

Michael Friedlander, Executive Director of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, said the \$500,000 will be primarily directed at the workforce component of the project.

“We’ve looked around the community to see where we can find more people to assist with the testing; these people come from a variety of places, including Virginia Western Community College’s Medical Licensed Technologist (MLT) associate’s program and Radford University’s Medical Laboratory Science (MLS) bachelor’s program,” said Friedlander.

“To be self-reliant,” Friedlander said, “we have to put an infrastructure in place. What’s more important to the infrastructure than a trained workforce and the necessary personnel?”

Along with testing for COVID-19, it is important that people have the resources they need in order to be safe. “Re-Tooling Virginia Manufacturers for Strategic Industries” is a multi-regional proposal that aims to address critical shortages in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The proposal was submitted by GOVA Region 1 and GENEDGE, an organization

that offers Virginia's industrial and manufacturing sectors solutions through business consulting.

Regions 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8 have endorsed the project, which received \$2.95 million in GOVA funds.

The GENEDGE team is currently working to identify suppliers who express interest in providing PPE and will also create a portal to allow buyers to make connections with PPE suppliers.

Bill Donohue, president and executive director of GENEDGE, said, "We want to identify local sources of PPE supply who are willing to make investments, from an advanced manufacturing perspective, to set themselves up with new business lines focused on fulfilling PPE needs in the future."

Shannon Blevins, associate vice chancellor of Economic Development & Engagement at University of Virginia's College at Wise, the support organization for GOVA Region 1, said, "I think it's important for all the regions that endorse this project to have the ability to shape the project. We anticipate that there would be monthly meetings on Skype or Zoom, which would be the most convenient way to advise and guide GENEDGE on the progress of the project. Then we would also make sure there are some strong connections with our local and regional economic developers in our planning districts as well."

The New River Valley Business Continuity Team, a partnership between local governments in the New River Valley health district, will also help people feel at ease when returning to the workplace. The team will use the funds to provide advisory when positive cases of COVID-19 are present at a place of employment in the Region 2 targeted industries, which include advanced manufacturing, life sciences and healthcare, information and emerging technologies, along with food and beverage manufacturing.

The objective is for employers, employees, customers, and the general public to feel safe in their environment and build confidence in business. The team will provide information over the phone relating to best practices if an outbreak occurs and will also provide sanitization services.

Dr. Noelle Bissell, a physician from the New River Valley Health District, said, "As more cases of COVID-19 occur, we have to be able to support affected businesses, whether they're small businesses or big manufacturing businesses. This model helps assist in the transition from our initial response to our recovery, and that recovery is key to getting our economy back and our confidence back."

Other approved projects included Pivot and Ramp Up and The Roanoke Regional Recovery Program. Mary Miller, director of The Regional Acceleration and Mentoring Program (RAMP), wanted to shift RAMP programming to meet social distancing requirements as well as address the economic fallout from COVID-19.

Said Miller, "This application would allow us to move our content online in a very modular format, so that we can mediate, moderate and engage with the participants of the program. An added benefit is we end up with a product that can continually be used with our alumni as well as other entrepreneurs around the region."

RAMP is a partnership between Virginia Western Community College, the City of Roanoke and the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council. The program has worked to boost technology-focused startups and provide startups with the mentorship and support they

need to grow their companies.

The Roanoke Regional Recovery Program, which received \$100,000 in GOVA emergency funds, was created with the goals of helping regional companies in the targeted traded sectors with immediate and long-term recovery and building future resilience in response to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19.

Beth Doughty, Executive Director of the Roanoke Regional Partnership, said, “This program will enable us to benefit from experts who are experienced in crisis recovery and facilitation and allow us to make those connections that will provide us with what we need to craft a strategy for recovery in the traded sectors.”

John Provo, director of the Virginia Tech Office of Economic Development, said, “For those who need assistance during the COVID-19 crisis, GO Virginia is here to help.”

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There are over \$1.5 million in collaborative grant funds available for Region 2 focused projects and over \$14 million in statewide competitive funds for multi-regional projects. GO Virginia Region 2 is currently accepting proposals for projects that seek to address the growth areas identified in the Growth and Diversification plan as well as proposals for projects that directly respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

[Learn More On Our Website](#)



Interview with GOVA Grantee Rich Diddams, Executive Director of Center for Engineering Research and Education (CERE) Labs



1. What is your career history?

I was a Marine officer for 20 years serving both overseas and in the US. I learned a lot of life lessons from the hardships others faced in undeveloped countries as well as the bravery and honor of those who served in combat. I also worked in different engineering fields consisting of large projects overseas. I own my own engineering firm with a strong focus on helping veterans' organizations and medical centers.

2. Were there any life lessons you learned from the Marines?

From the Marines, I learned the value of developing trust in subordinates and the importance of leading by example. You never want to tell someone to do something that you wouldn't do yourself.

3. What was your first job and what did it teach you?

When I was 16, I worked a job pouring concrete and was the only English-speaking person. Our crew was the hardest working team in the company with the highest productivity. I learned the importance of working with different cultures and the tremendous work ethic of those working in the blue-collar industry.

4. What is your favorite part of being Executive Director of CERE labs?

I love watching students and faculty achieve something they didn't think was possible; it is very rewarding. Seeing their face light up, they're proud of themselves and they should be.

5. What inspired you to become involved in the CERE lab project?

My father was an engineer and is my best friend who helped develop my interest in engineering. In regards to the Center, and the work we pursue, I want to share lessons and opportunities with students and faculty to enable them to achieve new skills and develop competencies to prepare them for future employment. One phrase we often use is 'over the horizon training' which simply means, possessing the skills to meet tomorrow's demands.

6. Do you have any advice for those wanting a job in the STEM fields?

It's important to work hard, never give up, be humble, be teachable and have positive influences in your life. It is also important to remember when you fail, you must get up and try again; here is where some of the greatest lessons are learned.

7. How have students furthered their careers through CERE labs?

Many firms are interested in students due to their skills but also their tremendous work ethic; these firms include BWXT, Framatome, Belvac, NovaTech, and Southern Air.

8. How have the CERE and AMPL programs had to change due to COVID-19?

The labs are fully operational; 24 hours a day are spent using 3D printers to make face masks and shields to mitigate the threat of COVID-19.

9. What plans do you have for CERE and AMPL labs in the future?

We have plans to pursue additional opportunities with industry and to further help students develop the future skills needed to make them relevant today and into the future.

10. What is your favorite activity/hobby to do outside of work?

I enjoy physical fitness. We also have a small farm and live in a log cabin; we enjoy farm work and watching our cattle, chicken, and turkeys roam our farm.



1. What is your career history?

I worked as a General Manager of Developer Platform & Tools for Microsoft, was Vice President for the Software Systems Division at Juniper Networks, Chief Technology Officer and Vice President of Product Management at Meridium, and Corporate Officer and Senior Vice President of Software Engineering at GE Digital.

2. What is the best advice you've ever received?

If you find a project where you're not being successful, fail fast, learn from the experience, pass along the learnings to others, and move forward quickly.

3. What made you want to become a member of the GO Virginia council?

If you look at GO Virginia Region 2, which spreads from Lynchburg to the West Virginia border, there's a lot of opportunity and a lot of incredible talent in the region. GO Virginia is an opportunity to work with like-minded individuals who want to promote growth and enterprise in this area.

4. What is your favorite part of being a GO Virginia Council member?

Collaborating, listening, learning from my peers in the region. We have incredible talents and mentors here in the region who just want to help. Getting to hang out with folks like Ray Smoot, John Provo, William Fralin, Amy Ankrum, Dr. Michael Friedlander, Beverly Dalton, John Dooley, and a host of others across the region has been a great learning experience. All of these individuals have a keen interest in *Ut Prosim* and how they give back to the community, which I admire and love.

5. What skills have you learned from being on the GO Virginia council?

In the realm of commercial software we ran very fast; we made decisions and we moved forward very quickly. The GO Virginia process has caused me to sit

back, reflect, listen, learn, and take different perspectives. It's the balance of taking what I've learned in private industry and putting it to use in a more public sector. I learn something new every day working with these incredible individuals.

6. What is the most challenging part of being a GO Virginia Council Member?

The number of new ideas and opportunities. The challenge is to vet through all of the great ideas and pick ones that will help us grow the region faster. Rather than a challenge, I would characterize it as an opportunity to sit back, listen, and learn from everything going on and look at all the great companies and people we have in the region.

7. How has GOVA had to change due to COVID-19?

I don't feel we've missed a beat leveraging various teleconferencing software like Zoom. I do think what we probably all miss is the social interaction, of being face to face and talking to each other about various ideas but through Ray's leadership we've embraced the moment and moved forward.

In terms of projects the region was able to adjust to focus on opportunities that came up with COVID-19, such as some of the testing work Dr. Michael Friedlander is doing. I feel the Commonwealth was very gracious in allowing us to change our focus slightly to look at some of these concerns. In many ways, I feel Region 2 leads the Commonwealth in many of these initiatives in terms of wanting to get things done and taking advantage of the great working relationships with the universities we have in the region, including Virginia Tech, Radford, Roanoke College, Lynchburg University, Hollins, Liberty, Virginia Western, Central Virginia, and New River Valley Community College. We have a wealth of great colleges and people here to leverage.

8. What are GO Virginia's plans for the future?

Our goal in Region 2 is to meet the mandate of creating new higher paying jobs in the region. From what I'm seeing and hearing, I think the state is looking for us to do more in terms of a leadership role. There are great opportunities for us moving forward to expand not just what we're doing here but expand that state footprint; there's a lot of commonalities between parts of the state in healthcare, high tech manufacturing, IT and the new 5G initiatives from telecommunications. As long as we continue to deliver and bring in good jobs, I see a bright future for GO Virginia.

9. What hobby would you want to try if time or money was not an issue?

I've been very blessed that my career was my hobby. I love writing software. I spend a lot of time these days on big data and data analytics. Now that I'm retired, I want to spend time doing things that I didn't have a chance to do before. One of those is to be more musically inclined. I would love to be a pianist, about half as good as Ray Smoot. I want to spend more time flying and sailing once the COVID-19 restrictions lift.

10. What is the most memorable trip you have been on?

I think one of my more memorable trips was to India. We were visiting one of the new IIT campuses in the country. I'm fascinated with the culture and the people of India, the various religions, and beliefs. We were coming back from this trip and there was a temple about 30 km out of town. I noticed a large number of people around the temple and I asked my guide what it represented. He told me a story of how these people were praying at this temple to get a work visa to the United States.

Learn about the GOVA Region 2 Projects on our website.



Future GO Virginia Meetings

July 16, 2020 - 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. - GO Virginia Executive Committee Meeting - [Click here for connection information.](#)

July 30, 2020 - 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. - Connection Information to Follow - GO Virginia Full Committee Meeting
