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From unemployed to self-employed

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PETERSBURG — *Layoffs, high unemployment rates and a scarcity of job openings are tempting many people to consider starting their own businesses as a way to replace lost income. It's a risky proposition at the best of times — about half of small businesses fail in the first five years, according to the Small Business Administration — and the current economic slump is increasing the challenges.*

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PETERSBURG — Layoffs, high unemployment rates and a scarcity of job openings are tempting many people to consider starting their own businesses as a way to replace lost income. It's a risky proposition at the best of times — about half of small businesses fail in the first five years, according to the Small Business Administration — and the current economic slump is increasing the challenges.

But for anyone who wants to make the attempt, there's free help available to give would-be entrepreneurs a boost over the hurdles every startup business faces.

The Small Business Development Center in Petersburg, operated by Longwood University with sponsorship from the SBA and local governments, provides experts, information and tools to help people get their businesses going on a solid footing. Services range from help with business planning to financing to marketing to hiring to bidding for government contracts.

"What we do is provide one-on-one counseling for small businesses," said Executive Director Pat Hood. "Our mission is to help existing businesses, and we also work with startups. Our goal is to provide assistance, training and help for small businesses."

Hood said the center is definitely seeing an increase in demand from people who are starting their own businesses after losing jobs with larger employers.

"We did a kind of survey at one of our classes recently," she said. "'I would say at least half of the people there had been laid off. They have experience in their field and want to use it for their own company rather than someone else.'"

For someone in that position, who has skills in a job but not in managing a business, the SBDC offers training and direct help with such nuts-and-bolts matters as writing a business plan, obtaining financing and performing market research.

The newest free service the center is offering, in partnership with the Crater Planning District Commission, is online business training from Element K, a Rochester, N.Y.-based provider of online learning services. The service, which can be accessed directly at <http://elementk.craterpdc.org>, offers self-paced courses in a full range of business topics, as well as skills certifications and training for vendor certifications.

"It's going to help because they can go in any time, night or day," Hood said. She said the sponsors hope to have at least 10,000 users signed up this year.

For more traditional, face-to-face training and business counseling, the center's office in the Crater Planning District Commission building at 1964 Wakefield St. in Petersburg holds frequent classes and offers a range of resources, such as industry databases and other research and reference materials. More information is available by phone at 518-2003 and on the Web at <http://www.sbdc-longwood.com/petersburg.html>.

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