

## **Bunker Labs**

Ascent Innovation, a business development partner of the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, is joining forces with the Ellsworth Development Authority to bring Bunker Labs, a national nonprofit business network keyed for the military, veterans and their spouses, to Rapid City early next year.

The first Bunker Labs event at Contraband in Rapid City, called Bunker Brews, drew 40 attendees, in what was a soft opening for the network.

“We’re still working on getting the bugs out, but we had a great turnout, great stories and great engagement,” said John Schneider, a veteran and business owner from Rapid City, who is joined by David Kneafsey, a retired U.S. Army Colonel, now Ellsworth Development Authority operations manager, and Mitch Nachtigall, Ascent Innovation’s Client Manager, and also a veteran.

A second Bunker Brews event is set for Dec. 17 at 5:30 p.m. at Ascent Innovation, 525 University Loop on the SDSM&T campus.

Bunker Labs officially launches for Rapid City in February. It will be headquartered in Ascent Innovation.

“Our goals for the bunker brews are to inspire, equip and connect military and veterans spouses,” Schneider said.

“It’s more of a business network geared toward the entrepreneur in the military community,” Schneider said.

Kneafsey said Bunker Labs has been helping military veterans and their spouses make the move from serving their country to building their own businesses for about five years.

“We get the benefit from their structure and development of a very high-quality program, purely in support of vets and their spouses,” Kneafsey said.

Nachtigall said he and Kneafsey have the luxury of being part of their respective organizations, while Schneider is retired military who owns his own business.

“We all have similar goals. We’re all new and still figuring out our duties,” Nachtigall said.

“Really, we’re all three arms of the same team.”

Nachtigall said veterans finish their military careers, often retiring around age 40, and are 25 percent more likely to start a business than the average non-veteran.

“Veterans move around a lot. They have the experience, but they don’t have the networking ability,” he said.