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## **Boots to Business Helps Veterans Start Personal-Security Venture**

*By Finance New Mexico, with the assistance of John Woosley, Director, U.S. Small Business Administration New Mexico district*

Chris Sweetin was transitioning to civilian life after more than 20 years as an active-duty Air Force flight examiner, engineer and instructor when he heard about the Boots to Business program from a representative of the New Mexico Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC).



Sweetin and fellow veteran Brian Cessop had discussed going into business together once they retired from the Air Force: They had an entrepreneurial idea but weren't sure how to make it real. So the longtime friends and comrades signed up for the Small Business Administration's Boots to Business class, which Sweetin called "a mini-MBA in entrepreneurship."

Boots to Business leverages the SBA's resource partners to help service members like Sweetin and Cessop start a small business or otherwise become self-employed in their post-military life. In New Mexico, the program is run by the VBOC, with the assistance of SBA and its resource partners the Small Business Development Centers, Women's Business Centers and SCORE.

Sweetin and Cessop tapped into several of those resources while developing a business plan to attract startup capital. They worked from a business plan template and customized it with the help of VBOC advisers. When the cost of a microloan proved too steep, the partners chose private financing.

In less than a year, the two Air Force buddies and two other partners opened Three D Security and Training Solutions in Albuquerque, providing security-guard training and personal protection to private clients. Today the business offers a full range of self-defense training and protective services to individuals and businesses.

"They're my resource for everything I need to know to run my business," Sweetin said of the VBOC in Albuquerque. "They're my safety net. I call them at least once a month."

SBA provides Boots to Business as the entrepreneurship track of the Defense Department's Transition Assistance Program. The program is presented at military bases and other installations where veterans are making the transition from military to civilian life. The spouses and caregivers of veterans, National Guard members and Reservists also are eligible for the program.

Earlier this year, SBA awarded continued funding to the New Mexico VBOC, which is part of the New Mexico Department of Veteran Services. The funding helped the center include Arizona in its service area, which also covers Oklahoma and Colorado, with some coordinated assistance in Texas.

While numerous players are involved in helping vets succeed, Sweetin said budding entrepreneurs need to understand that starting and running a business requires the type of commitment that military missions do.

“From the military, you’re used to the idea that the mission comes first,” he said. “[Vets] have to realize that this is going to be the hardest job ever.”

But Sweetin is determined to keep the company alive — and even to expand to neighboring states to meet growing demand. “I have to make this work,” he said.

To learn more about additional opportunities for veterans available through the Small Business Administration, visit [www.sba.gov/vets](http://www.sba.gov/vets). To learn more about services offered by the New Mexico VBOC, visit <http://nmvbo.org>.

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