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Cuyahoga County offers businesses real-world experience at The Lab

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In early December Cuyahoga County's Office of Innovation and Performance announced [The Lab @ Cuyahoga County](#), a new program that gives selected entrepreneurs and businesses access to county staff, data or facilities to help those companies commercialize a new product or service.

"The Lab is a way for us to support local businesses and entrepreneurs in an effort to help them develop ideas to take that product or service from the initial stage to launch," said Catherine Tkachyk, chief innovation officer for Cuyahoga County.

The program, which runs 12-16 weeks, will be based on the needs of each applicant.

The Product Ideation Track, Tkachyk said, will partner an early-stage entrepreneur, who needs additional data to develop a product or service, with a public-sector partner who will help answer questions and provide access to other experts in the field.

Charlie Lougheed, CEO and co-founder of [Axuall Inc.](#), a blockchain-based digital network for verifying identity and credentials, and co-founder of Explorys, a health care data and

analytics company bought by IBM in 2015, said all five of his startups were tested in the field before going to market.

"All the companies that I have founded or co-founded have followed some path of iterative design in either informal or formal arrangement with customers, whether it was a pilot or a spinout agreement," he said. "I always found that for us, as entrepreneurs and investors, it is a good way to de-risk an investment and a great way to understand what really matters to the end-using customer."

For companies that have already developed a prototype, there is the Product Validation Track. In that, the county will connect participants with the people, technology infrastructure and facilities that can provide testing and analysis in a real-world setting.

As part of the program, participants in The Lab can also access the infrastructure or facilities of the [Cleveland Metroparks](#), [Cuyahoga County Public Library](#) and Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency ([NOACA](#)).

With 7,000 employees in county government, Tkachyk said the county and its public-sector partners can offer businesses a wide variety of services and expertise.

"Startups need funding and talent, but they also need connections to potential customers who can help them test their new innovations," said Jerry Frantz, [JumpStart Inc.](#) chief investing and services officer. "Providing startups with access to the resources and subject-matter experts within the county is very forward-thinking, because it gives entrepreneurs the opportunity to get feedback on their ideas from the actual individuals who would be implementing them in the market."

Applications for the first class will be accepted beginning Jan. 6 and are due by Feb. 7, 2020. Tkachyk said she hopes to match applicants with public-sector partners by March. The Lab will also hold office hours at the JumpStart offices Jan. 9 from 10 a.m.-noon and Jan. 23 from noon-2 p.m.

Lougheed said the program has value for startups, which often operate on a limited financial- and human-capital budget and need to get a product to market quickly.

"What oftentimes people overlook is that amount of commitment and how big the risk is to the entrepreneur in the fledgling startup," Lougheed said. "Everyone knows the heyday when you sell the company for a profit, but there are a lot of scary days on the way there."

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