

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Ten Finalists Announced for the 2026 STRT1UP Entrepreneurial Pitch Competition; Event Open to the Public on April 14**

*AI-driven talent networks, holistic mental health services, bilingual insurance education, and cancer awareness apparel businesses will join others to vie for the \$4k prize.*



*High-res media images available [here](#).*

**CHESTERTOWN, MD – April 1, 2026** – Ten innovative entrepreneurs from across the Upper Shore have been selected as finalists for the [2026 STRT1UP Entrepreneurial Pitch Competition](#). These finalists will pitch their business ideas live on **Tuesday, April 14, 2026, at 2:00 p.m.** on the campus of Washington College.

The event, which is free and open to the public, serves as a high-stakes showcase of regional talent and creativity. Finalists representing Cecil, Kent, and Queen Anne's counties will compete for a grand prize of \$4,000, with \$1,500 and \$500 awarded to the second and third-place runners-up, respectively.

## Meet the 2026 STRT1UP Finalists

- **Kashira Brooks, Mentally Evolve Therapeutic Services (Queen Anne's County):** This mental health practice will provide counseling and relaxation treatments through telehealth and mobile services to help stressed professionals and caregivers improve their emotional well-being.
- **Wendy Velasquez Vicente, Puente Insurance (Queen Anne's County/Chesapeake College):** This venture will offer bilingual education and consulting to help Latino families and small business owners understand and secure the right property and life insurance coverage.
- **Liz Gilbert, Brackish Books (Queen Anne's County):** This mobile bookstore will bring a diverse selection of new and used books to Eastern Shore communities, serving as a local gathering spot for readers through book clubs and educational programs.
- **Bibiana Gutierrez, BIA Business Strategy (Kent County):** This consultancy will provide small business owners with data-driven growth plans and strategic roadmaps to help them streamline their operations and scale their companies successfully.
- **Candace Foreman, Core to Care (Cecil County):** This specialized support program will offer educational sessions and in-home therapy to help new mothers navigate the physical and emotional challenges of the first few weeks after childbirth.
- **Alicia Ilesha Boyd, Humble Hearts Catering & Events (Queen Anne's County):** This business will operate a community food market that provides rural families and seniors with affordable, locally sourced fresh produce and ready-to-heat meals.
- **Tshazi Kamau, Washington College Stryde (Kent County/Washington College):** This student-operated delivery and transportation service will allow college students to earn money by providing food delivery and rides to their peers and the local Chestertown community.
- **DeSales Ward, Garden Warrior, LLC (Queen Anne's County):** This service will provide eco-friendly lawn and garden maintenance, such as organic fertilizing and native plant design, to help homeowners and businesses maintain beautiful, sustainable landscapes.

- **Krystal Friesth, [theCommons Academy \(Queen Anne’s County\)](#):** This academy will offer practical workshops and training programs that help local business leaders and nonprofit teams learn how to safely and effectively use AI technology in their daily work.
- **KaNiya Cole, CCKL (Kent County/Washington College):** This clothing brand will create custom apparel with heartfelt messages to provide an emotional outlet and a sense of community for people and families affected by cancer.

Hosted by [Washington College's Warehime School of Business](#) and the [Upper Shore Regional Council \(USRC\)](#), in partnership with [Cecil County Economic Development](#), [Kent County Economic Development](#), [Queen Anne’s Economic Development](#), and [STARTUP Maryland](#), the competition highlights the region's commitment to nurturing small business growth.

This is Washington College’s third year hosting the Eastern Shore competition. “We are proud to host this celebration of entrepreneurial energy for the third consecutive year,” said Caddie Putnam Rankin, associate dean of the Washington College Warehime School of Business. “Seeing our own students earn top honors in the past highlighted the depth of talent within our community, and we are honored to support an event that equips emerging business leaders with the resources, mentorship, and confidence to take their next meaningful step.”

“The Upper Shore has always been built on hardworking people and bold ideas, and this year’s finalists are a reflection of that legacy. Each of these entrepreneurs is bringing forward solutions that meet real needs in our communities, by investing in them, we are investing in stronger local economies, new job opportunities, and a more resilient region,” said Susan O’Neill, Executive Director, Upper Shore Regional Council.

In addition to the live pitches, the event will feature a Business Resource Panel focused on "Ways to Find Funding and Other Resources to Grow Your Business in Rural Areas." The panel will be facilitated by Jack Wilson, chair of the [Upper Shore Regional Council](#) and Queen Anne’s County Commissioner. Panelists include:

- **Maurice Ames**, Director, Maryland Capital Enterprises (MCE)
- **Scott Hines**, Regional Director, Small Business Development Center (SBDC)
- **Zane Carter**, Business Mentor, USRC Business Mentor Program
- **Kim Montooth**, V.P. Business Banking, M&T Bank

Attendees will also have the chance to connect with 10 resource vendors who will offer valuable tips, information, and tools for running and growing a business in the region.

The public is encouraged to attend this free event and cheer on these local entrepreneurs. For more information, campus map, and to register to attend, please visit <https://www.kentcounty.com/strt1up>. Registration appreciated, but not required.

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### **About StartUp Maryland**

*Driven from within the startup community and led by/for entrepreneurs, Startup Maryland is peer-driven and focused on high-growth ventures. Forged on the themes spawned by national initiatives, Startup Maryland strives to connect innovation communities. We recognize the importance of founding - entrepreneurs, startup, ramp-up and speedup companies to the innovation economy. Startup Maryland rallies entrepreneurs, supporters, and other innovation stakeholders around four main mission themes: Celebration | Coaching | Curation | Capital. Learn more at [www.startupmd.org](http://www.startupmd.org)*

### **About Washington College**

*Washington College, Maryland's premier small college, enrolls approximately 1,000 undergraduates from more than 39 states and territories and 23 nations. Washington is known for outstanding academics in more than 50 academic programs. With an emphasis on experiential learning opportunities across the disciplines, ranging from internships and research to international study and civic engagement, Washington prepares students for successful careers and lives after graduation. The College is home to nationally recognized academic centers in the environment, history, and writing as well as the 5,000-acre river and field campus which provides unique research opportunities for students and faculty. Learn more at [www.washcoll.edu](http://www.washcoll.edu).*

### **About Upper Shore Regional Council**

*The [Upper Shore Regional Council \(USRC\)](#) is a Maryland-based regional planning and development agency serving Cecil, Kent, and Queen Anne's counties. It fosters economic growth, infrastructure development, and agricultural sustainability through initiatives like the [Micro Ag Grant Program](#), the [3rd Annual Upper Shore STRT1UP Roadshow](#), and business mentoring. The council connects local, state, and federal resources to promote the region's unique, bucolic identity while boosting its economic relevance.*