

Getting Down to Business

The dogs had their day at this year's [Fairbanks Startup Weekend](#).

The two teams that took top honors at the annual entrepreneurship event both catered to canines (and to other pets as well): second-place winners “Doggy Dispensary” proposed an attachment to automatic feeders to dispense CBD treats to anxious pets, while first place went to “Preparapet,” an app providing information and services to first-time pet owners. In the latter case, the team had set out to create a dog-matching service a la Tinder before the discussion turned to the challenges of pet ownership.

“We realized, maybe people don’t necessarily know how to take care of a pet,” explained team member Addeline Mitchell, a recent UAF Computer Science graduate. “From there we said, you know what, if people don’t know how to take care of a pet, where are they going to find out?”

The team’s deliberative process was par for the course for Startup Weekend, which ran November 15-17, 2019 at the Venue in downtown Fairbanks and which enjoyed support from Alaska NSF EPSCoR. On Friday, a couple dozen attendees gave 60-second pitches for novel

products to address pressing problems. Teams coalesced around the six most popular ideas, then spent the weekend fleshing them out with the help of local industry mentors and some speedy market research. On Sunday each team pitched their idea and business plan to a panel of local judges before a crowd of around 40 people.

Third place went to “Inventory Insight,” a proposal to use cameras and artificial intelligence to keep track of food supplies for restaurants or households. Other pitches were for an augmented-reality art gallery, an online service for medical records, and a distribution network for Aircrete, a type of next-generation concrete.

“I thought we had an incredible mix of industries,” noted Gerald Montuya, a UAF mechanical engineering undergrad and an organizer of the event. “We had high-tech solutions like the inventory one, and more industrial things like Aircrete, and we had more personal things like the doggy dispensary.”

Montuya estimated about half of the participants at the Fairbanks event came from UAF, with the rest members of the community. The event was put on by the Techstars seed accelerator company (as part of a statewide series of events called [Alaska Startup Week](#)) with help from a number of local sponsors. EPSCoR provided some direct financial support but made a more significant contribution by supporting Montuya and three other UAF students to travel to Columbia, Missouri to attend that community’s Startup Weekend and incorporate the knowledge they gleaned into the Fairbanks event.

“The entire schedule was built around what we experienced down in Columbia,” Montuya said. “We thought everything was well put-together ... we felt that (it) was a comfortable place to start and that we didn’t have to reinvent the wheel.”



Members of the “VitaVault” team pitch their proposal at Alaska Startup Weekend, November 17, 2019. The team proposed a service to securely store and transfer medical data.