

# Business: MONDAY

## Amherst firm a finalist in entrepreneurial challenge

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**AMHERST** — An Amherst company that developed a vest to calm people with autism is a finalist for a MassChallenge award.

Therapeutic Systems, founded three years ago by a pair of graduate students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, is among 26 startups from around the world in contention to split \$1 million in awards through the challenge.

The company's founders, Brian Mullen and Chris Leidel, will find out tonight at an awards ceremony in Boston whether they will be among the 10 to 20 winning entries.

MassChallenge, a nonprofit organization that gets its funding from sponsors and the state, uses the competition to help business ventures get off the ground.



The Vayu vest was designed by Therapeutic Systems of Amherst to calm people with autism. The company is one of 26 finalists in the MassChallenge, a competition designed to help startups get off the ground.

The challenge drew an initial 733 applicants from 38 states and 24 countries last spring. That number was whittled to 125 startups, all of which had the chance to participate in a three-month

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accelerator program designed to help speed the growth of their companies.

The program provided intensive mentoring and access to free resources including office space in Boston, legal support and targeted introductions to customers and funding sources.

"Being able to have a space in Boston has made it easier to make connections and meet people," said Mullen. "Mass-Challenge has brought the resources where we are instead of us knocking on doors of investors and angels."

He said it is common to have potential investors stop by the company's satellite office in Boston and inquire about the product.

The company remains headquartered at the Amherst Center for Entrepreneurship, at 196 Pleasant St.

working on a master's in business administration.

The vest uses a therapy known as deep pressure touch stimulation. It treats people by applying firm pressure to the chest, much like the feeling of a hug. The pressure is intended to calm and soothe children with autism and other disorders.

The vest wraps around the child, providing deep pressure on the back and lower trunk, giving the child a sense of being enveloped.

Therapeutic Systems began selling the vest at the end of April. The company has since started a rental program so that families, clinics, schools and others can try the device before deciding whether buy. Each vest costs about \$2,000.

### Road ahead

Should they be among those picked for the \$50,000 or \$100,000 prize, Mullen said Therapeutic

crease the access people have to the vest, he said.

While the MassChallenge is a great opportunity for Therapeutic Systems to expand its reach to the Boston area, Mullen said the company's western Massachusetts roots have been essential to its early success.

"The western Mass. entrepreneur community has been critical to our growth and success, especially early on in starting the company," said Mullen.

Among the awards and grants the company received early on came from the Harold Grinspoon Charitable Foundation's Entrepreneurship Initiative, from the National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance based in Hadley, and from the UMass Innovation Challenge.

The company also works with a local manufacturer, Dielectrics in Chicopee, which made the working prototype.