The Day

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Region to get plastics manufacturing training program

Course to be offered at Grasso Tech in Groton

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Following a multiyear push for a plastics manufacturing training program, and building on the success of the Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board program, Workforce Alliance is launching a free, 10-week Intro to Plastics Manufacturing course through Three Rivers Community College in January.

EWIB and Workforce Alliance are among the state's five regional workforce investment boards, with Workforce Alliance based in New Haven and serving the south-central region.

EWIB's Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, a government- and grant-funded training program, has gotten more than 1,500 trainees placed at local employers since its launch in 2016. This success led the state to authorize a $50 million bond bill to replicate the initiative elsewhere in Connecticut.

Workforce Alliance President Bill Villano said the bill allows not only for the replication of the MPI, but also for creation of initiatives in other sectors that struggle to find skilled workers.

Villano said Workforce Alliance was awarded $3.5 million of the $5 million the state released, and it has graduated 100 people from courses run at Gateway and Middlesex community colleges. The training program is called Skill Up for Manufacturing.

He said partners made some "minor modifications" to EWIB's curriculum because some elements were specific to Electric Boat. Skill Up for Manufacturing is demand-driven, and Villano said through the course of conversations with employers, some plastics manufacturers said they needed training a bit more specific than the basic manufacturing training.

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Plastics manufacturing training course at Grasso

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Workforce Alliance met with six or seven plastics manufacturers, and what resulted is a free, 10-week course that will run at Ella T. Grasso Technical High School in Groton, in Three Rivers' new Manufacturing Apprenticeship Center, from Jan. 28 to April 4.

Classes run Monday through Friday from 3 to 9:30 p.m., and applications for the entry-level program are available at bit.ly/CTSkillUp until the Dec. 13 deadline.

Villano explained that the course involves five weeks of basic manufacturing training, two weeks of classroom training specifically related to the plastics industry, and three weeks of hands-on training. He hopes that within the next six months or so, the program will be able to put out 30 or 40 entry-level plastics workers.

Villano said the program is happening in connection with Three Rivers and Grasso Tech because the Middlesex program was delayed, as it is taking place at Vinyl Technical High School and one of the rooms requires some modification for equipment.

The on-site training will be at Wepco Plastics in Middlefield, whose chief financial officer, Charles Daniels, was involved in both the original manufacturing training program and the creation of the plastics curriculum.

Daniels said Wepco first realized it had a workforce issue four or five years ago, when the company — which has about 30 employees — lost a worker who moved out of state, and it wasn't getting any applicants.

"We kept lowering our standard of what we were looking for as far as experience, and raising the amount that we were offering," Daniels said, "and we either weren't getting any candidates, or we were getting candidates that just weren't qualified to start that position at that level."

Also involved in the creation of the training program is Westminster Tool President Ray Coombs, who said there are zero plastics programs within a 75-mile radius of Westminster Tool, located in Plainfield.

"We've been having to grow our own, per se," he said. "We're in the business of making things, so we're not as good at teaching."

Coombs said the benefit of the new program, compared to hiring someone and starting from scratch, is consistency across manufacturers.

Westminster Tool primarily works in the medical device and aerospace component fields, but Coombs noted other applications of plastics manufacturing include gun manufacturing, automotive componentry and wire extrusion.

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