

Business leaders discuss successes, challenges of growing the workforce

By Erica Moser Day staff writer

Groton — As director of workforce development for Electric Boat, Courtney Murphy has seen a 20 percent reduction in departures of first-year employees, just due to the Eastern CT Manufacturing Pipeline.

"When they come into Electric Boat and the first time they're given that job assignment, they have some confidence," she said. "They know how to do it safely."

The pipeline, which the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) launched in 2016, has placed 1,100 people in jobs since its inception, 82 percent at Electric Boat and the remainder at other area manufacturers.

"Seventy-eight percent of them never had a drop of manufacturing experience before they went into the program, and I think that tells us there's a lot of untapped talent out there," EWIB President John Beauregard said.

The next steps are working with area high school students, and piloting a model of the pipeline for the health care industry.

The manufacturing pipeline was a much-discussed topic at Groton Inn & Suites on Monday, when Congressman Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, moderated a panel on "Eastern CT's Growing Workforce," featuring Murphy, Beauregard, and Jean Lee, a vice president at Pfizer.

The Chamber of Commerce of Eastern Connecticut hosted the business luncheon.

"The topic today is not just cheerleading; it's a reality that's out there in terms of a growing workforce," Courtney said.

He noted that the pipeline has "transformed the lives" not only of millennials, but also of "folks who are in their 30s and 40s who probably never thought of welding or design work."

Beauregard pointed out that in 2017, the Norwich-New London metropolitan area [saw a 2.5 percent increase in GDP](#), according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, compared to a federal growth rate of 2.1 percent and a 0.2 percent drop statewide.

Electric Boat is looking to hire 10,000 people over the next 15 years, both to replace retiring employees and to expand the company.

Lee discussed growth at Pfizer, though on a smaller scale than at Electric Boat. She noted that the Groton facility of the pharmaceutical giant added 200 new employees last year, a net growth of 50.

About half of this past summer's interns were offered full-time jobs, she said, and Pfizer is looking to re-internalize data management and programming.

"We are struggling to bring the right colleagues and the right capabilities to Pfizer, and the way we do that is not on our own," Lee said.

She noted that people coming to Pfizer are not moving to the area to educate their children but for their first job, "and we can get them in the door but keeping them here is some of the reason why I think we need to work with everyone."

She spoke of the importance of having good transportation between Boston and New York, and having enough of the kind of housing young employees want: smaller condos.

Speaking from the audience, Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, commented that she thinks "we're not doing a good job about highlighting what housing stock we do have, which encompasses this self-contained environment for young people."