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Courtney: 'Broken childcare system' underlines eastern Connecticut hiring woes

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U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney joined colleagues on the Committee on Education and Labor to advance its portion of President Joe Biden's proposed $3.5 trillion budget earlier this week.

One of 13 committees assigned to negotiate the final budget package, the committee's plan would invest $761 billion in various education and workforce development initiatives.

In addition to providing tuition-free community college for millions of Americans and funding to repair and modernize public school buildings, it includes $80 billion in support to workforce development and apprenticeship programs across the country.

"The employer interest in that is extremely strong," Courtney said this week. "This morning one of my staffers was on a conference call with the workforce boards in Connecticut, [they said] the phone is ringing off the hook [from employers] looking for graduates from the apprenticeship program."

Over the last five years, the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board has received 11,000 applications for its paid apprenticeship pipeline, placing 1,900 in job positions.

Mark Hill, the workforce board's president, said he hoped to direct the additional funding proposed under the legislation could be used to expand Eastern Connecticut's Manufacturing Pipeline by bringing the successful concept to other industry sectors.

Healthcare is a major opportunity to build on that success, Hill said, along with tourism and wind energy projects emerging in the region; and, with recreational marijuana sales approaching reality in the state, the growth of the cannabis sector could be an important option, he added.

Courtney underlines support for childcare

But the Build Back Better Act's proposed support for workers in Connecticut and across the country is only part of the remedy to the nation's lingering unemployment in the wake of the pandemic.

Statewide, Connecticut has recovered 67.2% of the 292,400 positions lost in the March and April 2020 Covid lockdown, according to the state's Department of Labor report on August 1.

Roughly 74% of the Norwich-New London area's workforce – or, 33,500 people -- became jobless between March and April of last year, the monthly job data shows; but after gaining back 90% of those positions by January of this year, new jobs added through the first eight months of 2021 have leveled-off.

The U.S. has recovered 76%, of the 22.4 million jobs lost in the spring of last year, leaving the nation 5.3 million jobs below its pre-pandemic level, the U.S. Dept. of Labor reported last month.

"There is a huge debate about why people weren't coming back to work, was it the unemployment [subsidies], I am sure partly that was the case in some instances, but there is no question people's concerns about their health and making sure their kids were in a safe place [while they were at work] is a huge factor," Courtney said.

After taking "such a big hit" from the pandemic, the ability to get the daycare industry "back on its feet" requires dealing with low employee pay and low reimbursement for families that will "continue to hobble our economic recovery and I think the employer community sees this clearly," he added,

In a recent conversation with Electric Boat Company President Kevin Graney, Courtney recalled the General Electric subsidiary's retention and employment levels during COVID "was really a drag" in terms of younger working families coming back to work in the shipyard.

Key provisions of the House Education and Labor Committee's portion of the bill will make pivotal investments, a proposed $450 billion, to lower the cost of childcare and secure universal pre-K for three and four-year-olds.

Under the proposed legislation, "the vast majority of families would not pay more than seven percent of their income on childcare, according to a committee fact sheet, and child care providers would have the resources to raise wages for child care workers and expand available supply to serve more children and families.

"COVID is one of these sort of "war-like" events that really put real stresses on all kinds of sectors and parts of American like that have really, in some cases, gotten broken and child daycare is certainly one of them," Courtney said.

Anthony DiLizia is a progressive Democrat running for Courtney's seat in Congress, which is up for grabs next year.

"It's a shame that it took a global pandemic to get Congress to act on things that have been longstanding issues," he said in a statement.

"The Build Back Better Act is a much-needed piece of legislation, but it is merely a bandaid for issues that need sweeping systematic change.