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# As CT begins next round of $50M apprenticeship program, some say funding is woefully inadequate to fill manufacturing jobs pipeline

By Sean Teehan

Connecticut's manufacturing sector is facing a historic workforce shortage that could get worse before it gets better, as aging Baby Boomers head toward retirement leaving thousands — or even tens of thousands — of open jobs for younger generations that have so far largely overlooked the industry.

In response, Connecticut last year embarked on a new $50-million initiative to train and certify as many as 10,000 eligible residents to fill job shortages mainly in manufacturing, but also health care and construction.

The Apprenticeship Connecticut initiative, a grant program overseen by the state Department of Labor, is now in its second year with $10 million recently allocated to help fund skills-training programs developed by regional workforce-development boards.

That's on top of the $5 million doled out for the program last year.


Lyle Wray, Executive Director, Capitol Region Council of Governments

But some involved in workforce development and manufacturing say there's a key problem with Apprenticeship Connecticut: the funding available doesn't come close to the size and scale of the problem it endeavors to solve. While the initiative is good, and seems to be approaching the right problems the right way, it's just one piece of a larger workforce-development puzzle that still has stakeholders scratching their heads.

"It's not enough money, to put it in really simple English," said Lyle Wray, executive director of the Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), who has been involved in state workforce-development efforts in the past. "We've got 150,000 — give or take — manufacturing jobs, 5 to 10 percent of workers are retiring every year, and we're producing 1 to 2 percent [as replacements]. Not to knock [Apprenticeship Connecticut], but $5 million to $10 million doesn't cut it."

Program proponents admit it's not a panacea for the industry's workforce woes, but it can be part of the solution. Workforce development has become a main focus for Gov. Ned Lamont, who recently named two dozen business, nonprofit education and union leaders to a revamped workforce council that will study and recommend new workforce-development strategies.

He also named a new chief manufacturing officer — Colin Cooper — who will be focused on policies that help train the next generation of workers.


State Sen. Cathy Osten (D-Sprague)

For now, one of the key efforts underway is Apprenticeship Connecticut, which State Sen. Cathy Osten (D-Sprague), who sponsored the bill that funded program, said has the potential to revamp manufacturing here.

"I believe that Connecticut has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to get young people into what I would consider a basic job in Connecticut servicing over 400 manufacturers, and in particular our defense industry," Osten said.

Department of Labor Commissioner Kurt Westby said about 1,000 companies are currently enrolled in the state's formal apprenticeship program, employing about 6,000 apprentices, mainly in construction. There is now a greater focus on manufacturing.

**Active apprenticeships in CT**

| Fiscal year | Active apprenticeships in CT | Active apprenticeships in US |
|---|---|---|
| 2018 | 5,528 | 585,026 |
| 2017 | 5,665 | 533,607 |
| 2016 | 5,856 | 505,371 |
| 2015 | 5,611 | 447,929 |
| 2014 | 5,175 | 410,375 |

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

## Success stories

So far, Apprenticeship Connecticut has helped fund several job-training and placement efforts across the state.

For example, the Northwest Regional Workforce Board, which has been awarded $1.25 million over four years through the program, has placed six people in official apprenticeships, and about 20 more in non-apprenticeship training programs. That's in addition to work it's doing with local school districts, community colleges and manufacturers to create a more robust training-to-employment channel, said Executive Director Cathy Awwad.

At the same time, Workforce Alliance, New Haven's regional workforce-development board, received $3.5 million to fund its Skill Up program, a five-week manufacturing pre-apprenticeship initiative, said Ann Harrison, the group's communications director. The program's curriculum was written in partnership with local manufacturers that provide input on the skills they need from entry-level and apprenticeship hires, and is taught by professors at Gateway and Middlesex community colleges.

“This whole thing started because employers were already telling us they need people, there’s not enough people applying who have skills,” Harrison said.

Skill Up, which has trained about 100 people and placed about 50 in manufacturing jobs, is modeled after the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board’s (EWIB) four-year-old Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which is considered an industry gold standard. EWIB received $3.5 million in Apprenticeship Connecticut funds during the initiative’s first year.

That program is anchored by the hiring needs of Groton submarine maker Electric Boat, which must add hundreds of workers to meet its obligations under massive federal submarine contracts.

Electric Boat has worked in coordination with EWIB and a network of 70 area manufacturers, colleges and high schools, to develop employer-driven curriculum and standards that provide high odds of trainees landing jobs afterward, said John Beauregard, the board’s president.

As of 2019’s third quarter, more than 1,500 trainees from the program have been placed in manufacturing jobs at about 260 workplaces, Beauregard said. About 80 percent of those placed had no prior manufacturing experience before the pipeline program.

“We set out to essentially build that workforce by using the design principles that the employers gave to us,” Beauregard said. “We designed what we would call a demand-driven approach.”

It’s been a hit with employers, too.

Wallingford precision-manufacturer Hobson & Motzer, which has been upping its efforts to find qualified workers, has hired about eight people from the program.

“They bring talent that is better than what we would get off the street,” said Asi Carmeli, Hobson & Motzer‘s director of human resources.

Hobson & Motzer, which makes precision metal components for several industries, including medical and aerospace, employs about 350 people and currently has five open positions.

In addition to hiring out of the pipeline program, the company has partnered with workforce boards, schools and other organizations on manufacturing workforce-development efforts, and even hosted an open house for students at 10 technical high schools and community colleges to promote manufacturing as a career path, Carmeli said.

“There’s a shortage of talent, and people out there either unemployed or underemployed are not looking at manufacturing as a viable option,” Carmeli said.

## More funding needed?

Eric Brown, vice president of manufacturing at the Connecticut Business & Industry Association, the state’s largest business lobby, said workforce-development programs and apprenticeships are certainly part of the solution to the manufacturing industry’s woes, but they’re not a cure-all.

That's because manufacturing jobs run the gamut from welding, a skill that can be learned in a relatively short time, to advanced manufacturing, which generally requires advanced training and degrees.

In the long run, Brown said, the focus has to be on introducing manufacturing in high schools and even middle schools so students can get interested and begin training before graduating. Additionally, Brown said advances in technology could reduce the number of workers manufacturers need, which could make many of the skills taught in pre-apprenticeship programs obsolete.


Eric Brown, Vice President of Manufacturing, Connecticut Business & Industry Association

"Companies are saying we need more people, but they're looking into how they can become more efficient," Brown said. "Maybe if they invest in technology they don't need five new people, they need three new people."

Westby, the state labor commissioner, said workforce boards partnering with companies that agree to hire out of pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship programs, fills an important need. The basic manufacturing training courses are often enough for people to learn entry-level skills, and expanding manufacturing programs in high schools and community and state colleges can foster a more advanced set of prospective employees, but apprenticeships bridge the gap between entry-level workers and trained mid-level employees.

"There's a medium-term need," Westby said. "This is about building, expanding the workforce of skilled workers filling these job needs."

Wray, of CRCOG, said the multi-pronged workforce-development approach is a good one, but he suggested Connecticut invest as much as $60 million annually to truly attack the need.

"[Right now] you have a relatively small amount of money chasing tens of thousands of vacancies," Wray said.

Osten, the state lawmaker, agrees the initiative could use more funding, but that there are other workforce-development programs available to help.

And more money could become available based on Apprenticeship Connecticut's success.

"We could probably put in another $100 million, but we would need the people willing to apply [for the programs]," Osten said. "Once we spend that $50 million, I think we should have the next dollar amount [ready]."