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Connecticut needs thousands of skilled workers to build nuclear submarines in coming years. Job training is available for unemployed workers.



A welder at Collins & Jewell Co. Inc., a Bozrah manufacturer and Electric Boat supplier, is pictured here in 2017. PATRICK RAYCRAFT (Patrick Raycraft / Hartford Courant)

BY STEPHEN SINGER

Rep. Joe Courtney on Thursday convened General Dynamics Electric Boat representatives and others to review the work of the region's workforce pipeline churning out a rising number of nuclear submarines.

Submarines and workforce development "have to go hand in hand given what we're trying to produce for our nation," said Andrew Bond, vice president for human resources at Electric Boat.

What is the manufacturing pipeline?

The manufacturing pipeline initiative is an effort by government, industry, organized labor, state labor and economic development agencies, colleges and technical schools to develop a local labor force that continuously fills jobs at Electric Boat, its suppliers and manufacturers in other industries.

It's credited with placing 1,738 workers at Electric Boat, suppliers and other manufacturers since 2016.

The Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board is a key player identifying what employers need and developing a consensus among community leaders to align training with requirements of local employers.

"You can get sort of an accelerated process of getting people ready, which is key because this is happening fast out there in terms of growth and work," said Courtney, D-2nd.

What's driving demand for workers?

Electric Boat is benefiting from a shift in military strategy to face down Russia's attempt to boost its influence in the north Atlantic and China's aggression in the Pacific.

More employees will be needed to handle the workload and also replace retiring baby boomers. That means more submarines and General Dynamics Electric Boat is building two Virginia class submarines a year and last October began construction of the next-generation Columbia ballistic submarine,

The first stage of construction is at EB's Quonset Point, R.I., shipyard and work will begin to be delivered to Groton by 2024, Bond said.

How many workers will be hired?

Electric Boat plans to hire 1,100 workers in 2021 and has already hired 200 in the first six weeks of the year. Of this year's hires, 600 will be engineers, 250 will be trades workers such as pipefitters, sheet metal workers, machinists and electrical workers. And another 250 workers will be hired for support jobs.

Electric Boat employs 17,000 workers.

It's not just submarines

Manufacturing training and apprenticeships in eastern Connecticut are not solely for Electric Boat. Biomedical industries are "just swamped" making syringes and other medical equipment while other companies are making hospital gowns, said Chris Jewell, a Bozrah manufacturer and EB supplier.

"Manufacturing is pivoting to the needs of the community and the area," he said.

What changes are being considered?

Jewell said manufacturing should be marketed to students in middle school and high schools.

"We're going to need people who aren't even born yet frankly to be able to go into these trades and do this work," he said.

State Labor Commissioner Kurt Westby suggested "email blasts" to hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers and others who are recently jobless to publicize job training and available employment at Electric Boat and its suppliers.

What's the placement rate for trained workers?

Mark Hill, president of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Board, said 95% of workers who went through the last 10 classes were placed with employers despite the coronavirus pandemic.

And assessments and some training curriculum at colleges are being done virtually, he said.

Courtney said job training and apprenticeships will be more critical because many jobs will not be coming back after the pandemic passes