Journal Inquirer
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Sep 28, 2019 Updated Oct 3, 2019

Manufacturing jobs grow in eastern Conn.

By Zachary F. Vasile

State and federal investments in eastern Connecticut's once-struggling manufacturing sector are paying off, according to new data made public by state and nonprofit officials.

Studies from the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, an agency operating under the Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act that oversees workforce development programs, and the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance placed the region's manufacturing job growth at 11.3 percent between 2015 and 2019, four times the state's average and twice the U.S. average.

The reports also indicate that about two-thirds of all manufacturing-related growth in the state in that four-year time span took place in the 41 communities covered by the Eastern Workforce Investment Board.

The region, which corresponds roughly to the easternmost fourth of the state, includes Coventry, Mansfield, Ashford, Union, and Willington.

State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, who chairs the Senate's Appropriations Committee, linked the area's recent successes to support for projects such as the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which aims to educate and train local workers and technical school students.

"Ten years ago, eastern Connecticut had the ninth-worst labor market in America," Osten said Friday. "Now we have the 13th best. That's a big deal and it's because we have used state workforce dollars to increase employment and reduce unemployment."

John Beauregard, president and CEO of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, said the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative has completed 61 training classes and made 1,500 job placements in the past three years. The credit for that progress, Beauregard noted, belongs to the program's proponents in the legislature, training providers such as Quinebaug Valley Community College in Killingly, and industry allies like submarine-builder Electric Boat.

"When you take a step back and consider the regional coordination required to fuel a region that has catapulted to 13 of 380 areas across the country when it comes to manufacturing growth, you get a real appreciation for the dedication of the 30 or so partners that we get to work with for the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative," he said.

Eastern Workforce Investment Board executives said strategies like the pipeline effort are chipping away at the state's much publicized skills shortage, which has stymied hiring among manufacturers for years.

"Eighty percent of our placements are people without formal manufacturing experience, yet employers report they perform extremely well on the job," said Mark Hill, the board's chief operating officer "These people are getting an opportunity thanks to the leadership of the state of Connecticut."

A steady stream of capable workers is also helping the region's industrial sector capitalize on a new round of massive national defense projects. Pratt & Whitney is currently working through a 1,000-engine backlog for Lockheed Martin's F-35 fighter jet, while Sikorsky is rolling out its CH-53K King Stallion heavy-lift helicopter for the U.S. Marine Corps and General Dynamics is beginning work on a 14-year, $5.1 billion contract for a next-generation ballistic-missile-armed submarine.

While praising the state for its investments so far, figures involved in labor force development said lawmakers must continue to prioritize job training if they want to realize even greater gains.

"Collectively, we all share the opinion that we're just scratching the surface and, with continued funding, we're looking for similar results in the future," Beauregard said.