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Lamont's commitment to job training delivers early dividends

Workforce Council plans to establish eight regional partnerships; increase computer science in schools; generate more college internships

By Scott Benjamin

Connecticut is not only a nice place to visit, but a prime place to live.

24/7 Wall St. ranks it fourth on its list – behind, in order, Massachusetts, Colorado and New Jersey.

From 2019 to 2020 it advanced from fifth to fourth place, overtaking Hawaii.

24/7 Wall St. stated that it is "largely because of [Connecticut's] well-educated and relatively healthy population. Nearly 40% of state residents aged 25 and up have a bachelor's degree, compared to only about one-third of Americans nationwide in the same age group. The state population is also one of the healthiest overall as life expectancy at birth among residents is 80.9 years, nearly two years longer than the national average."

However, Connecticut is a tough place to find a job, which may explain why its population has been decreasing over the recent years.

Connecticut and Michigan are the only states that have fewer employees now than in 1989. It is the only New England state that didn't recapture all of the jobs lost in the decade following the 2008 Great Recession.

The Boston Globe reported in December 2016 that Massachusetts had supplanted Connecticut as the economic kingpin of New England, partly because major corporations and young people had less interest in a suburban state.

However, it is not just about General Electric moving most of its operations out of Fairfield.

In February 2018 – just five weeks after he formally launched his campaign - Gov. Ned Lamont (D-Greenwich) told Patch.com that it is not just that Connecticut isn't generating enough new jobs but that there were positions available at defense contractors Electric Boat in Groton and the Lockheed Martin operation at Igor Sikorsky in Stratford as well as at Travelers Insurance in Hartford that remain vacant because they can't find qualified applicants.

State Rep. Stephen Harding (R-107) of Brookfield said recently, "We've been wondering why these jobs don't get filled."

In the fall 2019 Lamont appointed aerospace design engineer Colin Cooper as its first-ever chief manufacturing officer and established the Governor's Workforce Council, which last fall presented a 49-page initial report. The Council includes top executives from such companies as Electric Boat, Stanley Black & Decker, NBC Sports, Bigelow Tea, Sound Manufacturing, Synchrony, AQR, Yale-New Haven Hospital, Infosys, The Hartford, Indeed, Aventri and ReNetx.

The governor also has established a Connecticut Office of Workforce Strategy in the state Department of Economic And Community Development. Kelli-Marie Vallieres, the longtime CEO of two manufacturing companies in Old Saybrook, is the executive director.

Those efforts have produced results.

"The collaboration between the state Department of Labor, Department of Education and the Department of Economic and Community Development is the best I've seen in my 30 years," said Rich DuPont, the president of Resource Development Associates, a management consulting firm based in Watertown.

Lamont told Patch.com three years ago, "A degree from a technical high school or a community college in advanced manufacturing will get you an initial higher-paying job than if you had a degree in Sociology from Yale."

The Hartford Business Journal has reported that Lamont has called Connecticut "the Silicon Valley of advanced manufacturing."

Vallieres said in a phone interview that "advanced manufacturing is projected to reach historic levels in Connecticut for the next 30 years."

She added that, for example, General Dynamics' Electric Boat shipyard in Groton is now building "two submarines per year instead of one."

The Workforce Council's initial strategic plan stated that, "Demand for manufacturing employees is projected at 6,000 new workers per year due to the impact of retirements and new defense contracts. Existing training programs can produce 3,000 new employees per year, leaving a deficit of 3,000 people per year."

Mark Argosh of Westport, the chairman of the Workforce Council, said to address this shortage his panel aims to launch eight regional sector partnerships by this December in advanced manufacturing and other sectors.

One of the models for that effort is the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board's (EWIB) manufacturing pipeline initiative.

The EWIB, based in North Franklin, is a non-profit agency mandated through the Federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014.

It oversees a network of workforce-related programs funded from a variety of sources including the operations of the region's American Job Centers, according to its web site. Its training programs, based in about a dozen trades, last between five to 10 weeks and "focus on building employer competencies for open jobs."

EWIB President/CEO Mark Hill said in a phone interview that the MPI has a "95 percent" placement rate.

Hill said that overall the EWIB has 25 partners. "That's the key," he remarked. "They come to the table."

Economist Donald Klepper-Smith, the owner of Datacore Partners, said the Workforce Council would be wise to emulate EWIB's programs in other parts of Connecticut.

"This kind of strategy takes workers from nonproductive sectors and places them in more productive sectors," he said. "Someone who has been laid off at a casino can become a manufacturing worker."

"Over 25 years with DataCore Partners I had more than 100 clients and EWIB was one of the best," Klepper-Smith exclaimed.

Hill said he believes that the Workforce Council could get the same results in manufacturing in New Haven, Bridgeport and other parts of the state. He added that the formula also could yield results in other employment fields.

In his 2020 book, "Trade Is Not A Four Letter Word" (Avid Press, 299 pages), former Obama Administration Export-Import Bank Chairman Fred Hochberg stated that Rhode Island has benefited by explicitly pairing up education and training programs with jobs that actually exist today and that companies expect to need very soon.

He wrote that in 2014, the year that current U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo was initially elected as governor, Rhode Island had the second highest rate of employment in the nation. In five years it went from 49th to 27th as it slashed the joblessness rate almost in half. One of the biggest factors was strategic training.

Hochberg also lauded Rhode Island for providing computer instruction from kindergarten through 12th grade.

The Workforce Council's strategic plan reports that in Connecticut 93 percent of the parents want computer instruction in the schools but only 45 percent of the high schools offer it.

Vallieres said there should be computer science instruction starting much "much younger than high school."

Additionally, reports indicate that nationally only one of every six high school graduates take a course in personal finance and most high schools have limited Business departments even though Business is, by far, the most popular college major.

Argosh, the executive director of Social Venture Partners, said both business and personal finance courses are important.

Vallieres said that more business education could be taught in the state's high schools without radically shifting the blueprint. In many high schools the Business Education Department is roughly the same size as the Physical Education teaching staff.

She said that "it can be imbedded in a lot of curriculums. It doesn't have to be a case of offering more Business courses. It can be integrated into math courses."

Vallieres noted that the strategic plan recommends more efforts to identify career options for ninth grade high school students. The report identifies the P-Tech program that has been successful in Norwalk.

Said Argosh, "Too often guidance counselors focus on getting the student to college."

The Council also has retained Campus Philly, whose mission is to fuel economic growth by encouraging college students to study, explore, live, and work in the region where they are attending college.

Argosh said, "What is really critical is getting more students into internships."

It appears that the federal relief of the last year will further job training in Connecticut.

Hill said the state was aided by worker training funds in the $2.2 trillion CARES Act that former President Donald Trump signed in March 2020, and that additional funds will be available from the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Act that was recently signed by President Joe Biden.

He said the CARES Act provided funds for such items as child care, transportation and training equipment.

Argosh said that during the pandemic the state has provided virtual training sessions over and job fairs. He said that Indeed - which has a headquarters in Stamford, and is the largest job service in the world – has been a valuable resource. Indeed COO David O'Neill is a member of the Workforce Council.

He said that principally due to the efforts of former state Sen. Beth Bye of West Hartford,, the commissioner of the Office of Early Childhood, Connecticut has "fared better" than most states In providing child care services during the pandemic.

Argosh said that over the coming years that – in addition to advanced manufacturing – Connecticut is expected to have job growth in life sciences, softrware development, insurance, financial services, gaming and hospitality.

One critical area are the low-income workers who have struggled during the pandemic.

Wall Street Journal columnist Gerald Seib has stated that the Federal Reserve Board estimates that among the lowest quartile of wage earners there could be an unemployment rate of 20 percent.

Said Harding, "The lower quartile of wage earners has been hit particularly hard during the pandemic. Those people need jobs."

Klepper-Smith said that "work force development is especially important in Connecticut because of the structural change in the labor market, which has been apparent following the last two recessions."