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Eastern Conn. program serves as example as state puts $70 million into workforce training

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Mark Hill, the president and CEO of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board, said he's glad to see the state making a large commitment to support job training.

"Now more than ever, people are trying to get into different fields and different jobs," Hill said.

On Jan 5, the state officially announced CareerConneCT, which would invest $70 million into workforce training, with the aim of getting 8,000 people into the workforce statewide.

"This represents one of the largest investments Connecticut has ever made in workforce training," Kelli Vallieres, the executive director of the Office of Workforce Strategy, said during a press conference on Tuesday.

The funds are split into multiple pots. This includes the three industries the state sees as having the highest growth right now, in manufacturing, healthcare and IT, with each receiving $14 million in funding. Another $10 million will go toward energy, union and non-union trades, and infrastructure, and $9 million for other industries.



File photo of Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative related job training at the Three Rivers Community College Manufacturing Apprenticeship Center at Grasso Technical High School in Groton. *(John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com)*

The money itself will be awarded to institutions of higher education, workforce boards, and non-profits, but a priority will be placed on grant applications that will go toward use for underserved populations.

Vallieres said that this program followed state employment efforts funded with $10 million from the federal CARES Act, which she said showed that the state did a good job at reaching underrepresented communities, and how to prioritize business engagement and jobs promised at the end. This incarnation trained 1,300 individuals, with 70% being BIPOC and 63% being from low income background. From this program, 95% of participants completed it.

Vallieres said the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative has been an inspiration for Career Connect, as it "has gained national recognition, and showed effectiveness when applied in its entirety."

Trainings available through the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative are determined by the needs of local companies. People who enroll in the program, including many who don't have prior experience, take classes for weeks or months getting them trained, and are often hired by the time they complete the program.

Hill said that with the funding, there is a need to coordinate efforts across the workforce programs across the state, and that Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative has been "a shining example" of what these programs can do, as it has created over 2,000 jobs over six years.

Hill also said that the Eastern Workforce Investment Board also plans on applying for funds in the program alongside the state's other four workforce investment boards to make sure there's a continuity in how manufacturing is handled.

"It's an exciting time in workforce development to have this commitment of funding to help take people who might not have the experience in manufacturing, and help turn them into viable employees for the sector," Hill said.

Looking ahead, Hill said the 8,000 figure is a good goal to start with for the state, as it makes a challenge for businesses and organizations to reach that outcome.

"Time will tell if they can push for more," Hill said.

This program comes at a time when Connecticut is still recovering from the initial pandemic-related job loss, with the state Department of Labor's most recent numbers for November saying the state has recovered only about 75% of the jobs lost in March and April of 2020. Hill said that jobs skills training is generally a good way to get people back to work, as it makes switching industries a less daunting feat.

"It all goes hand-in-hand with people trying to get back into the workforce and have access to programs to facilitate that," Hill said.

Even beyond just what the state is promoting in job training, Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Angela Adams said there are opportunities for people to receive training be it from in-person training or remotely and organizations ranging from community colleges to the Women's Business Development Council to American Professional Education Services, for EMT training, in Norwich.

"There's plenty of resources that are out there, they just want to have to put the work in," Adams said.