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Report: New job growth needs region's support



Seth Bloom, of Uncasville, a lead fabricator at Collins & Jewell Co., grinds a steel connector Friday at the Bozrah business.
[JOHN SHISHMANIAN/ NORWICHBULLETIN.COM]

Retraining programs vital for workers' success

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A new state report says Eastern Connecticut is poised to see job growth in advanced manufacturing and healthcare, but must also be ready to take advantage of other opportunities such as more diverse employment fields from the area's two tribal casinos.

The report, commissioned by the state Department of Economic and Community Development and Department of Labor, was prepared by Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board President John Beauregard, Sean Nugent, interim executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region, and Rob Michalik, director of legislative affairs for DECD.

The report is an analysis of the casino-related jobs southeastern Connecticut lost during the Great Recession, and a forecast of where those workers might find new employment and what programs are in place to help that transition along.

"Clearly, we're having a shift in the regional economy," Beauregard said. "A lot of people are underemployed. They're motivated to get a better job, but reluctant to go the traditional routes."

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By the numbers

3,000: Pipeline Initiative sign-ups, one year
200: Enrolled in training programs
92 percent: Graduates placed into manufacturing
1,350: Planned EB hires in Connecticut, 2017
Sources: John Beauregard, EWIB
Electric Boat

JOB

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The ramp-up of submarine manufacturing activity at Electric Boat, plus related suppliers, is expected to grow the workforce there from 13,000 to 18,000 by 2030.

The report was included with testimony late last month on a bill before the state senate. The bill, introduced by State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, would provide resources to expand training opportunities for those in southeastern Connecticut seeking work in the advanced manufacturing, health care and defense manufacturing fields.

Osten held a series of regional economic development roundtables over the past year and said she "wholeheartedly" supports funding for the advanced manufacturing and healthcare training programs in the region.

"We can open new opportunities for different careers for those who have lost their jobs in the gaming industry as well as fill the pipeline for defense manufacturing industry-related jobs," Osten said.

A February 2016 survey of Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance members shows that 11 of the 17 responding EAMA employers surveyed are hiring, and 16 of 17 employers indicated plans to hire during the next three years.

In-demand positions among EAMA members include welders, machinists, operators, technicians, and engineers.

And interest from job seekers is high. The Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative registration portal has received 3,000 sign-ups since February 2016. The initiative received a $6 million Workforce Innovation Fund grant in October 2015 — one of only six in the nation granted by the U.S. Department of Labor.

"That's a huge number of people expressing interest and shows that the pipeline works," Marge Valentin, associate dean of workforce development at Three Rivers Community College, said.

Training for those jobs is taking place locally, through Three Rivers in Norwich and Quinebaug Valley Community College in Danielson.

"The schools are key players in providing training in the trades jobs that are seeing growth," Valentin said.

The pipeline provides a short-term customized training program that aligns the skills of job-seekers with specific hiring needs of an employer. Job-seekers in the program can be placed into "family-sustaining careers" in just 6 to 10 weeks of 200 to 300 hours of intensive training, Beauregard said.

It's translated to more than 200 job placements in its 10 months of operation, he said. Of that, roughly half were previously unemployed.

Locally Bozrah-based manufacturer Collins & Jewell is a part of the manufacturing pipeline program.

"They are stepping up and hiring through the manufacturing pipeline," Beauregard said.

Three Rivers has trained more than 100 people in the past year as a result of the WIF grant, Valentin said. Training takes place at a new welding laboratory at Ella T. Grasso Technical High School in Groton. "It's been a very successful model," she said. "People who go through the program typically find employment quickly."

The school offers machinist, welding and outside manufacturing training programs, she said.

"This spring the big push will be in welding, based on the demand coming from EB," Valentin said.

By December 2016, the initial training classes concluded under the WIF program, with program graduates being placed in employment at a 92 percent rate. The program anticipates training 450 individuals through March 2019, when the WIF funding will be exhausted.

Manufacturers also can take advantage of the Connecticut Manufacturing Innovation Fund, a $60 million dollar initiative administered by the state. The fund gives matching grants to manufacturers to assist with the purchasing of equipment, research and development and training.

Since the fund's establishment in 2014, more than $850,000 has been approved for use in New London and Windham counties. The funds have assisted 27 companies and helped train 600 employees in the two counties, according to the report.

The region's other jobs bright spot, the report said, is in healthcare.

In Eastern Connecticut, as overall employment decreased in the last decade by 4 percent, healthcare employment increased 13.5 percent.

"Healthcare has been, and will continue to be, one of the fastest growing industries in the region," the report said. "Healthcare reform, along with age demographic and workforce shifts, will continue to increase employer demand for qualified workers across a range of occupations."

"It's a growing and evolving field," Southeastern Connecticut Enterprise Region Executive Director Nancy Cowser said. Cowser previously was vice president of planning at United Community and Family Services in Norwich. She said the aging population and changes in healthcare such as electronic records and billing and telemedicine, the use of telecommunication and information technology to provide clinical health care from a distance.

Cowser said the report is aligned with economic development strategies for the region.

"We're not going to bring businesses in if we don't show we have the workforce they need," she said.

Beauregard said putting people to work through the Pipeline Initiative also benefits the state by saving money on support services, and reduces unemployment insurance borne by employers. Each manufacturing job created also leads to 1.5 new "indirect" jobs in other industries, he said.

The manufacturing pipeline model is transferrable to other industries, Beauregard said.

"We can take this into other industries where growth is upon is," he said. That's being done with development of a healthcare pipeline program, he said.

The report contains several recommendations for "rebalancing" the region's economy toward growing industries and sectors.

They include collaborating with the tribes to identify skills that former casino workers can transfer to other industries and expanding the scope and reach of the regional manufacturing workforce partnership.

Other suggestions include expanding customized training programs, reviewing the effectiveness of the educational systems, increasing focus on STEM education in schools and evaluating state funding sources for the pipeline program.