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Program to create 6K critical jobs

CareerConneCT to funnel $60M into 19 training programs across state

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NORWICH — Sitting at a U-shaped table inside Three Rivers Community College in Norwich, U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh told a group of education and industry leaders that the nation would near a nursing shortage within five years.

Nurses are leaving the industry due to the pandemic and burnout, he said, but 60,000 people nationwide are waiting for an opportunity to replace them. The challenge is getting these people into the classroom.

"The reason Three Rivers gets 96 students (in nursing) and no more is because of capacity and faculty," he said, as the school has a waitlist roughly as large as those accepted.

A $70 million state program, called CareerConneCT and funded by the American Rescue Plan, looks to solve that problem, funneling $60 million into 19 job training programs across the state. The goal is to create 6,000 jobs in critical industries, including

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nursing and other healthcare careers.

The remaining $10 million will go to supporting infrastructure around the program, including promotion and operating an online job portal.

This program will target individuals who are returning to school for a new career path, or people who haven't been working for some time.

While the individual trains for a high demand sector, like manufacturing or healthcare, there will be support services for the individual, ranging widely from childcare to transportation to career advising.

"These apprenticeship programs change lives," said American Federation of Teachers CT Vice President John Brady, who used such a program to switch careers and graduate from Three Rivers in 1999, after he was laid off from his manufacturing job. "That's incredibly important, and they put more people into the workforce which is very important."

CareerConnect CT was modeled after the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative from Franklin-based Eastern Workforce Investment Board, which is being granted $7.85 million, and is expected to have a similar economic impact. The older program has been able to create $1.5 million in wages for Eastern Connecticut since starting in 2015, as one job in manufacturing can create two jobs elsewhere in the economy, said Kelli-Marie Valleries, chief workforce officer for the Connecticut Office of Workforce Strategy.

"If you do the math, the return on investment is pretty darn good," she said. "A lot of those people might have been on supportive services in the past, and now they're independent."

Joe Carbone, president and CEO of Bridgeport-based The WorkPlace, said this program is possibly the most ambitious he's seen in his 26 years in workforce development, as it focuses on multi-organization collaboration, rather than just shuffling around money. In turn, the program is able to accommodate a program participant's needs holistically.



U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, U.S. Congressman Joe Courtney, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, and President of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities Terrence Cheng visited Three Rivers Community College in Norwich Tuesday to talk about the CareerConnect CT program and the nursing shortage. MATT GRAHN/NORWICH BULLETIN

"I think we're seeing, in a sense, Connecticut reborn," Carbone said.

The WorkPlace is receiving $7.5 million from the program for it's Southwest Healthcare Career Academy, training people for entry level jobs.

Back at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich, student Emma Sui said medicine was always her dream, but she began training for a career in engineering. With the pandemic inspiring her career change, she went to Three Rivers because it's a four-semester curriculum with clinical hours.

"It's the fastest way for me to do a career change," Sui said.

Nursing and other healthcare jobs available in Connecticut

Between COVID-19 causing nurses to leave the industry, leaving Connecticut more than 13,000 jobs short in the education and healthcare sector, and the expansion of health centers and healthcare facilities, creating more jobs to fill, nursing demand in the state is at an all-time high.

Part of the solution would be to get nurses who left the industry into teaching, Walsh said, while speaking at Three Rivers.

Employee retention has also been an issue with the industry, so Brady also commended the recent approval of measures aimed at stopping workplace violence, and protecting union organizing, along with advocating for the Nurse Staffing Standards for Hospital Patient Safety and Quality Care Act, which would empower nurses to be patient advocates and set nurse-to-patient staffing minimums.

"When you improve the work conditions, you improve retention," Brady said. "That's important, as you don't want students graduating, and then having them find out in three or four years 'I'd rather be doing something else'."

With CareerConneCT expected to encourage people to take up more education, the student debt issue isn't lost on U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney.

While the current freeze on public loan debt repayment, set to end this month, could still last longer based on what the president decides, Courtney said the best way to take care of student debt is to prevent it in the first place, and the program is designed to give this workforce education at little to no cost to the student.