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EMPLOYMENT

US labor chief touts EB workforce development

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GROTON — Calling Electric Boat an "anchor" of Eastern Connecticut's economy, the nation's top labor official on Thursday visited the shipbuilder to learn more about a unique, multi-level partnership that has created a route for direct employment to hundreds of residents in the region.

"A lot of states have relied just on federal money to fund their workforce systems. Not Connecticut," U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez said during a round table forum to discuss a manufacturing initiative pipeline that pairs area community colleges and the technical high school system with workforce development boards, state agencies and trade associations.

SEE CHIEF, A5



Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, left, U.S. Labor Secretary Thomas E. Perez and Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, speak at a workforce development summit Thursday morning at Electric Boat in Groton. ADAM BENSON/ NORWICH-BULLETIN.COM

CHIEF

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"Economic opportunity is at our doorstep here, and we have a chance to do something really special," said John Beauregard, executive director of the Franklin-based Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board. "We understand that this is not just a referral system to these growing employers. We are going to have nail the ability to deal with basic skills, the ability to deal with pre-vocational skills, the ability to deal with job-specific skills."

Maura Dunn, EB's vice president of human resources, said the company averages about 520 new hires annually. And with EB securing the largest Navy contract in history - a $17.6 billion deal signed in 2014 to build 10 Virginia-class submarines over the next five years, the job outlook for the manufacturing giant and support businesses that provide it materials is bullish, officials said.

"We all want to make sure the remarkable anchor EB has been here in Connecticut continues, and to do that we need to make sure we fortify the skills superhighway," Perez said. "Manufacturing is not your father's Oldsmobile, it's a new day, and there are great pathways to the middle class in these jobs."

The 'earn and learn' model of apprenticeships feeds the system, and veteran EB worker Melvin Olsson, who started at the shipyard in 1962 as an apprentice and then spent 43 years with the company, said he is pleased the emphasis remains.

"I believe when people learn a trade, they get a foundation for the rest of their life, and I think that's an important thing," Olsson, of Mystic, said.

Perez was joined by Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, the state's two U.S senators, Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy; U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, and presidents of Quinebaug Valley and Three Rivers community colleges.

Educators were invited because the campuses play a critical role in growing a base of workers with in-demand skills for companies like EB and other big manufacturing firms.

At Quinebaug Valley Community College, for example, officials have embedded courses from the National Institute for Metalworking Skills into its curriculum, and the Danielson school has graduated 102 students from its advanced manufacturing program since its inception in 2012 – 95 percent of whom have found jobs.

"There's a real commitment to increasing the educational abilities in southeastern Connecticut to ensure you have an educated workforce, and that we are responsive to what your needs are," Three Rivers President Mary Ellen Jukoski said Thursday.

Courtney's district is the largest in Connecticut in terms of manufacturing, and ranks 73rd nationally in the category.

In a state that posted a 2.3 percent growth in manufacturing output in 2013, Malloy said building a foundation of younger employees in the field is critical to keep up with those who are retiring or aging out of the sector.

"We need to replace or hire 5,000 manufacturing employees per quarter, and it's programs like the secretary had the opportunity to do today that's allowing us to do that," Malloy said.

Thursday's visit was Perez's second to Eastern Connecticut in six months. He stopped by the Norwich Orthopedic Group last November to visit East Haddam resident Katherine Hackett, Courtney's guest of honor at the 2013 State of the Union address.

"I think in this job, you've got to make house calls, and I listen here in Connecticut and what I've seen is there is a remarkably robust economic base," he said. "Anybody who says manufacturing is dead or dying in America hasn't looked at the facts and hasn't been to Electric Boat."