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Filling 14,000 Electric Boat Jobs Is Work

By **JEFFREY S. GEIGER**

I have the honor of leading the 15,000 men and women who build our nation's nuclear-powered submarines. Our Groton shipyard is bustling, with six submarines in various stages of construction. Later this year, we will christen USS South Dakota, the 17th Virginia-class submarine built by General Dynamics Electric Boat.

We are experiencing some of the busiest days in a generation at EB, but are challenged to hire enough workers. So we are taking steps to ensure we will have a skilled and job-ready workforce. These efforts can provide a blueprint for other employers and for potential partners at all levels of government.

Submarine construction is a unique form of manufacturing, requiring a high degree of skill in disciplines that include welding, pipe fitting and machining. Many of these jobs require a security clearance. Our submarines are powered by nuclear reactors and must operate in the planet's harshest environment.

Like many manufacturers, our labor force is aging. In order to build the submarines the Navy requires, we need to hire 14,000 employees over the next decade.

Through a collaboration with the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, training programs are matched with Electric Boat's needs to help get job seekers working in our shipyard quickly — a win for all involved. EB is developing a strong, consistent pipeline of talent, and Connecticut's economy benefits from a more qualified workforce.

People in our state want to work. Unfortunately, not enough people have the skills we require. To hire the people we need, we had to find the right partners within the workforce-development system to better connect job seekers to jobs. Our experience shows that these partnerships work.

We worked to communicate what skills we require and what training is needed. Our partners identify learning institutions that can deliver our curriculums. While the public sector takes the lead to obtain grant funds, we provide matching funds, donations-in-kind and commitments to hiring trainees. Electric Boat mentors students and provides feedback on their performance.

The Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline program, managed by Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, is a particularly effective collaboration. This initiative offers short-term classroom and online training and job search assistance for the unemployed or underemployed. The training, offered in Connecticut and Rhode Island, is designed to fit the hiring needs of EB and other local manufacturers. In just six months, the pipeline received 4,000 applicants for training that includes welding, pipe fitting and inside and outside machining.

In collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Labor, we have reinstituted our apprenticeship programs, which allow 60 employees to learn while they earn. Next year, these programs will double in size. Existing state and federal incentives make these programs particularly attractive to employers like Electric Boat. Congress is considering eliminating these incentives, which would threaten our ability to continue to offer these opportunities to job seekers. Fortunately, we have tremendous support from U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, Democratic Sens. Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy, and the rest of the Connecticut delegation, who advocate for funding to keep these programs running.

We have similar support from other regional leaders, including Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and the Department of Economic and Community Development.

These partnerships clearly pay off. Electric Boat's manufacturing business is growing, and is providing good, stable jobs that will help rebuild the middle class in our region. As our business grows, so does our local economy. Unemployment in in the Norwich/New London area has dropped from 6.9 percent in 2014 to 4.8 percent in May. The Eastern Connecticut Association of Realtors reported a 20 percent year-over-year increase in single-family homes sales in New London county.

To recruit the workforce American manufacturers need requires the continued cultivation of public and private sector workforce development programs that bring educational institutions and community organizations into the effort. All participants must invest, including industry. Based on our experience at electric boat, we know such partnerships benefit everyone.

Jeffrey S. Geiger is the President of General Dynamics Electric Boat.

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