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In Groton, labor secretary praises workforce development program

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Groton — U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh became the latest in a parade of President Joe Biden's Cabinet members to visit Connecticut as he toured Ella T. Grasso Technical High School on Tuesday.

The visit by the former Boston mayor celebrated the start of CareerConneCT, which is funding 19 job training programs at a cost of $70 million.

The Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board received $7,850,000, the largest of the grants.

The state Office of Workforce Strategy is running the program, which is meant to help people whose employment was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic find work. The state legislature directed the federal money from the American Rescue Plan Act to this workforce development program.

The U.S. Department of Labor wrote in a news release that Walsh visited Grasso Tech to highlight the CareerConneCT effort and to "build partnerships across several industries and offer short-term training solutions to get thousands of people back to work."



SEAN D. ELLIOT/THE DAY

U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, left, listens to Collins and Jewell employee David Dorr, right, and CFO Chris Jewell, center, during a visit to Grasso Tech to help announce a new job training program Tuesday.

Employers such as Accenture, Eversource, Electric Boat, Hubbard-Hall, Infosys, Orsted and Yale New Haven Health have committed to hiring 4,000 people through the program.

CareerConneCT is looking to train and place workers in the manufacturing, health care, information technology, infrastructure/construction, life sciences and business services sectors, among other career paths.

The new program comes as Electric Boat continues to ramp up its hiring.

Spokesman Dan McFadden said the submarine builder is looking to hire a total of about 3,900 people in 2022. This includes 900 skilled trades positions in Groton and 1,343 at Quonset Point.

In addition, the company's engineering/design fleet support at all

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sites, but primarily Groton and New London, it is aiming to hire about 1,300 people.

Since EB began working with the workforce investment board in 2016, the company has hired 1,800 workers through the program and is expecting an uptick in hiring this year due to the expansion of CareerConneCT.

Walsh called Grasso Tech "beautiful" during his remarks and said its participation in CareerConneCT should serve as a nationwide example.

"The state of Connecticut is an important partner to the Biden-Harris administration," Walsh said Tuesday. "This is the model for what we need to do all across America; identify a situation in which we have opportunities to get employment for young people and create new opportunities."

Members of Biden's administration have visited Connecticut often. In July, U.S. Health and Human Services Department Secretary Xavier Becerra visited a Planned Parenthood in Waterbury and also made a visit to Norwich. In May, U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm visited Waterford and New London. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have also made trips to Connecticut during their tenure.

Walsh, Democratic U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont and others spoke during a news conference following a tour of the school. New London Democratic Mayor Michael Passero, state Sen. Paul Formica, R-East Lyme, state Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, state Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague and state Rep. Christine Conley, D-Groton, all were in attendance.

Walsh spent some time stumping for Biden, downplaying "the great resignation" and arguing that the American economy is turning a corner, and opportunities for workers are expanding.

"We are focused on workforce programs that are innovative, that provide real pathways to good, in-demand jobs, and that are equitable, supporting workers who have lost out for these opportunities in the past," Walsh said. "Connecticut employers have been eager to get involved. It's a win-win for employers and workers."

Lamont said that once people complete these short-term training programs, they will essentially have jobs waiting for them as employers search for skilled workers. He praised the Manufacturing Apprentice Center at Grasso Tech.

"Here at Ella Grasso, they're oversubscribed, a waiting list. Tougher to get into than Yale," he said. "This is a place where people want to be because of the incredible guaranteed jobs you have on the back side of this."

Lamont, as he has many times throughout the pandemic, urged people to take up a trade and fill the state's job openings.

"Every single company that's looking to expand to the state of Connecticut asks me about, workforce, workforce, workforce," Lamont said.

Blumenthal made a similar point.

"The most common question I get from the Pentagon is, are you going to have enough people to fill those jobs and build those submarines?" Blumenthal said.

Courtney, who was credited for securing the first batch of funding for the Eastern CT Workforce Investment Board (EWIB) agreed about the need for workers as construction on Columbia class submarines has begun.

"The demand signal is still incredibly intense between Quonset Point and Groton," he said. "This CareerConneCT initiative ... is all about trying to size up the success that's here and also extend it to other sectors and other populations throughout the state."

"The funding did emanate from the rescue plan that President Biden signed into law in March of 2021," Courtney added. "Governor Lamont and the legislators ... recognized that it was more than just disaster response, it was about pivoting out of COVID and trying to grow the economy."

Participants chosen for CareerConneCT will have supportive services available, such as funding for child care, housing and transportation that can create obstacles for employment.

Another speaker during Tuesday's news conference, 18-year-old David Dorr, who attended Ledyard High School and Norwich Free Academy, said he went through EWIB's Youth Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative and is now employed at Collins and Jewell, an industrial equipment supplier in Bozrah.

"I always liked working with my hands," Dorr said. "I'm not a desk worker, I just can't do it."

"It was a great opportunity going through the class," Dorr said. "You're taught so much. You're taught safety. You're taught how to use tools. You're taught career paths. There's so many doors open. There's so much variety and so much you can do with what you learn there. I'm glad there's so much going on to make it a bigger idea."

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