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Cabinet secretaries hail EB effort

Raimondo, Walsh learn about apprenticeship program during visit

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Groton — In a display of southern New England's newfound political clout, two U.S. Cabinet secretaries joined a U.S. senator, two U.S. representatives and Gov. Ned Lamont on Tuesday in vouching for the kind of apprenticeship programs that are helping Electric Boat ramp up its submarine-building workforce.

Prior to a news conference, a contingent of government leaders and elected officials headed by Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, the former Rhode Island governor, and Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, the former Boston mayor, toured EB's shipyard here.

No media were allowed on the tour.

During the news conference, Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., referred to Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, as "the most powerful person in the room," a nod to her December election as chairwoman of the House Appropriations Committee.

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Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, left, speaks with Kelli Valliéres of the Governor's Workforce Council following a tour of EB on Tuesday.
SARAH GORDON/THE DAY

EB touts apprenticeship program for visiting officials

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"It's good to be the chair," DeLauro said, signaling her support for President Joe Biden's proposed American Jobs Plan, which she said would set aside $285 million for apprenticeship grants in 2022.

The jobs plan, which carries a price tag of more than $2 trillion, calls for a combined investment of $48 billion in workforce development infrastructure and worker protections and would create 1 million to 2 million new registered apprenticeship slots like those being filled at EB.

EB President Kevin Graney said despite the pandemic, the company hired more than 2,000 people last year and expects to hire 2,400 more this year.

With 17,500 workers in Groton and New London, at Quonset Point and in Newport, R.I., and in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere, EB expects to ultimately employ 20,000 people as it fulfills Department of Defense contracts for the production of Virginia-class, fast-attack submarines and Columbia-class, ballistic-missile subs, Graney said.

EB launched its existing apprenticeship programs in 2016, helped by a federal grant and assistance from the state Department of Labor. About 300 shipyard employees now are enrolled in three registered, "earn-while-you-learn" apprenticeship programs, a number that will grow to 500 by 2023.

"It's one of the best things I could have done," Arnold Chappell, an inside machinist who recently completed an EB apprenticeship, told reporters Tuesday. The 25-year-old Waterford man went to work for EB soon after high school and joined the apprenticeship program after two-and-a-half years at the shipyard. The program involves on-site training as well as coursework at Three Rivers Community College.

Four years later, he's qualified to operate a variety of machines, including a lathe, his current assignment.

Holly Boyle, 33, of Groton, worked for a software firm before taking a job at EB as an administrative aide. She said applying for a slot in EB's design apprenticeship program was the best career move she's made so far.

Raimondo said she and Walsh, two of the five members of Biden's "Jobs Cabinet," would work together to expand the federal government's commitment to apprenticeship programs.



SARAH GORDON/THE DAY
U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh speaks during a news conference following a tour of Electric Boat on Tuesday.

"Not everyone needs to go to college to get a decent job," she said, but people do need some type of post-high school training to navigate the employment market. As America struggles to fill jobs vacated during the COVID-19 pandemic, apprenticeships are going to become more important, she said.

Walsh said EB's apprenticeship programs lead to good-paying jobs that can sustain families. Such programs, he said, can be a way to provide jobs for workers of color and for women, segments of the population that have been "shut out" in the past.

The U.S. Department of Labor announced Tuesday it is seeking nominations for members to serve on a reconstituted National Advisory Committee on Apprenticeships, which Biden had directed be reinstated. The committee will include representatives of unions, employers, apprentices, community colleges and other institutions, and will focus on expanding apprenticeships into such industries as clean energy, technology and health care.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said EB and eastern Connecticut have had a long relationship with apprenticeship programs, including the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which helped train and grow EB's workforce, enabling it to take on additional work. Moreover, he noted, the region is the birthplace of the federal Registered Apprenticeship Program, established by the 1937 Fitzgerald Act, a bill sponsored by Rep. William Fitzgerald of Norwich.

"Electric Boat has benefited greatly from Fitzgerald Act programs like the Manufacturing Pipeline, and now — with President Biden's Jobs Plan and a House of Representatives leading the push to reauthorize the Fitzgerald Act for the modern era — our region is prepared to capitalize even further," Courtney said.

Lamont said apprenticeship programs like EB's — "a partnership between the Connecticut Department of Labor, our higher education institutions, and the business community" — have a long history in the state.

"Programs like this are a vital part of the nation's employment make-up, and an important resource to help provide workers with the tools necessary for in-demand jobs," he said.

The state labor department's Office of Apprenticeship Training has 6,710 registered apprentices and nearly 1,700 employers spanning 50 occupations. Over the past 20 years, 900 apprentices have worked at Electric Boat.

Rep. John Larson, D-1st District; Rear Adm. Rick Seif, commander of the Navy's Undersea War Fighting Development Center; Commissioner Kurt Westby of the Connecticut Department of Labor; New London Mayor Michael Passero; and others took part in Tuesday's shipyard tour.

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