The Day

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Labor secretary praises regional manufacturing program in visit

Acosta stops at EB and other sites in the region

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There were two points U.S. Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta stressed several times throughout his visit to Eastern Connecticut on Tuesday: It's crucial to promote what he calls "demand-driven education," and that manufacturing wages have gone up more than wages for any other sector in Connecticut.

At the request of Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., Acosta visited the region to learn more about the Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative run through the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board.

Along with Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., they toured the manufacturing center at Quinebaug Valley Community College, partook in a roundtable at the Montville American Job Center and did a closed-to-the-press tour of Electric Boat. Gov. Ned Lamont joined them for the roundtable.

"One of the things I think is unique about this program is the level of cooperation between Electric Boat and the community college system,"

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Acosta praises training program

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Acosta told reporters. "The educators are going to the employers, those that are hiring, and saying, 'What do you need?'"

Acosta noted there are 7.1 million jobs open nationwide — outnumbering those who are seeking jobs by 1 million.

The Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative addresses the skills gap by providing free classes — such as design engineering, welding and pipefitting — that each run several hours every weekday for several weeks. The program has gotten federal, state and private funding.

To get into the program, one must be certified as unemployed or underemployed. EWIB President John Beauregard said this is because coordinators don't want employers taking from one another, as that does nothing to help the supply chain.

Since the first graduating class in May 2016, the program has yielded 1,311 job placements, mostly at Electric Boat but also at about 190 other employers. Eighty percent of MPI graduates had no prior manufacturing experience, and the starting wage is about $16 to $18 per hour, Beauregard said.

He likes to use the mantra of former Porsche CEO Peter Schutz: "Hire character, train skill." The pipeline, he said, is a "just-in-time delivery" model that allows educators to run certain classes as employers need them.

"Those are fairly unusual concepts for a lot of academic institutions," Acosta said.

Blumenthal, Murphy and 30 other senators on Monday sent a letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee — on which Murphy sits — asking for increased funding to programs like the MPI.

Education, workforce needs discussed

When he's going to bat for increased submarine production, "the most common question I'm asked at the Pentagon is, 'Are you going to have the people to make them?'" Blumenthal said. He added, "We're here about our national security and our national defense. It's not only about jobs."

He was addressing a roundtable that included leadership from the Eastern Advanced Manufacturing Alliance, Three Rivers Community College, Grasso Tech, Electric Boat and trade unions.

Chris Jewell, co-owner of the Bozrah manufacturer Collins & Jewell, said the "beauty of this program" is that employers were involved from day one in the creation of the curriculum.

With more people applying to technical high schools than there are spots available, Jewell said he's getting superintendents, principals and guidance counselors at traditional high schools to better serve the segment of their population that isn't going to college.

Several pipeline graduates were at the roundtable. Ricardo Jimenez held retail and fast-food jobs before entering the pipeline, and he now has been at Electric Boat for five months.

"I can see a life for me and my family now," he said.

This echoed Acosta's belief that we should judge "not by the certificate that you have but by whether you have a family-sustaining career path going forward."

Acosta said he will be funneling fees from H-1B visas — which most commonly are for high-tech, health care and advanced manufacturing workers — into apprenticeship programs.

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