



New training programs aim to match Connecticut manufacturers with workers

By Luther Turmelle

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With thousands of manufacturing jobs to fill in Connecticut now and in the future, and not enough qualified workers to fill them, industry employers, state community colleges and job training agencies are trying to fill the employment pipeline.

Gateway Community College and the New Haven-based Workforce Alliance are about to launch a program that would take unemployed and under-employed workers, provide them with an intensive five-week training course and then help them find jobs. The first five-week session of classes is scheduled to start in February and with a Dec. 7 registration deadline, about 35 people have put in applications, said Bill Villano, president and CEO of Workforce Alliance.

“We’re hoping to get over 100 registered because not everyone is going to pass the skills assessment we’re doing and some may drop out of the programs,” Villano said. “We see this as an opportunity to help these people step up and move into a better career. Somebody who graduates from this program will have the same skill level as someone who has been working for a (manufacturer) for at least six to 12 months.”

Villano said he hopes the program, which is being provided to students at no cost, will graduate 25 people every five weeks, which will help build up a pipeline of qualified workers over time.

Real need

For decades, manufacturing employment was in a serious state of decline. Between November 1997 and October 2016, Connecticut lost nearly 87,000 manufacturing jobs. In 2014 alone, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated Connecticut shed more than 5,300

manufacturing jobs, making one of six states with the sharpest employment declines in the sector that year.

Since then, manufacturing has become one of the state's strongest employment drivers, according to industry and employment experts.

A Connecticut Business & Industry Association study estimated manufacturers would need to fill 13,600 jobs in 2018, but were struggling to attract and retrain workers.

Nearly all of the state's manufacturers — 99 percent — expect to add jobs in the next three years, and more than 13,000 jobs will need to be filled in 2018 to meet growing demand, according to the 2017 Survey of Connecticut Manufacturing Workforce Needs.

The New Haven-area program, known as Skill Up for Manufacturing, is largely modeled after a program launched in eastern Connecticut in 2016, he said. That program, Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline, was designed to help Groton-based defense contractor Electric Boat find enough workers.

Electric Boat has committed to build 12 Columbia Class submarines for the Navy and will begin building them in fiscal year 2021, according to company officials. The first Columbia Class sub will be delivered to the Navy in 2027 and all 12 vessels will join the Navy's fleet by 2031.

And at the same time Electric Boat is preparing to deliver its first Columbia Class submarines in the middle of the next decade, it still will be producing two Virginia Class submarines per year.

Three Rivers Community College in Norwich runs the pipeline program. More than 1,000 people who have gone through the program have gotten good manufacturing jobs since the program started.

The individuals who have been hired have earned about \$37 million in direct annual wages and roughly \$38 million in indirect annual wages. Seventy-eight percent of those placed in in the Eastern Connecticut Manufacturing Pipeline program had no prior manufacturing experience, according to Villano

Gateway and Workforce Alliance are launching the training program using between \$80,000 and \$100,000 in federal money. But in order for the program to continue long term, Villano said an influx of state money that was approved by Connecticut lawmakers during the last legislative session will need to come through.

“The legislature approved approximately \$50 million in funding to replicate this kind of program statewide,” he said. For the money to be released, Villano said it must be approved by the State Bond Commission.

Villano said the ideal applicant for enrolling in the Skill Up programs “is someone who likes to work with their hands and is comfortable using math.”

“If somebody comes up a little short in our math assessment test, we have a remedial program that can help them out,” he said.

Participants in the Skill Up program will attend classes six hours per day, five days a week. Individual job search assistance is available during and after the training.

Manufacturing industry employers will have direct hire opportunities, access to hiring incentives and expect to continue training on-the-job, according to Villano.

One of the area employers that is backing the Skill Up program is Penn Globe, a North Branford-based company that makes street lighting. Marcia LaFemina is president of the company and said she is supporting the program because “I believe there should be options beyond going to college or failing.”

“There are really good jobs out there and this program can help people find them,” LaFemina said.

Villano said a welder can earn about \$60,000 a year after just a couple of years working at Electric Boat.

Penn Globe has a workforce of about 20 people, LaFemina said.

“Even though there wasn’t a program like this in place, I’ve worked outside the box and hired people who may not have the experience, but who I know can do the job,” LaFemina said.

And if graduates of these intense training programs don’t get jobs at Electric Boat or aircraft engine maker Pratt & Whitney, the companies have hundreds of smaller suppliers that provide parts for the work they do.

Workforce Alliance has already had experience running a similar program on a much smaller scale in Wallingford.

The town’s Manufacturing Employment Pipeline wrapped up in early November. Joe Mirra, chairman of Wallingford’s Economic Development Commission, said 13 of the 29 people who signed up for the program completed it and have manufacturing jobs.

It's not going to change the world, but for those 13 people, they are going to be earning more money, Mirra said. "And it opens the jobs they were in up to other people. And these are not just jobs we are getting people, these are careers."

Mirra said it is critical state officials and educators take the manufacturing workforce shortage seriously.

"The manufacturers need their positions filled," he said. " If they don't get them filled, they are going to look elsewhere, in other states."

Mirra said the Wallingford pipeline program was five weeks with classes for two hours each night. Town officials hope to launch a new training program in early 2019 that will be focused on military veterans, he said.

The Wallingford training pipeline, like the one being offered by Workforce Alliance, is being offered free to enrollees, with four local manufacturers — Allnex, Byk, Hobson Motzer and Ulbrich Steel — picking up costs in return for the right of first refusal on hiring program graduates.

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