

The state's manufacturing future needs this boost

By WILLIAM VILLANO | HARTFORD COURANT | DEC 29, 2018 |



Luis Perez, of Manchester, brazes a piece of tubing for a General Electric engine at Pegasus Manufacturing in Middletown. Manufacturing jobs are slowly coming back in Connecticut as the economy improves and demand rises for aerospace parts.

Connecticut's manufacturing future continues to evolve. The “dirty, dark and dangerous” shop floors of yesterday have increasingly become bright spaces with smart technology. Advanced manufacturing, robotics and the internet of things are more than buzzwords, they're happening here.

But with all the advancements on the manufacturing floor comes a corresponding need to improve our approach to developing the workforce necessary to ensure success.

Recently approved Public Act No. 18-178 authorizes the state bond commission to appropriate \$50 million to the Department of Labor for a statewide “pipeline” initiative. It brings to scale a new thinking pioneered by the Eastern CT Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative and calls for industry partnerships, a demand-driven workforce development approach and customized training. It is a strong start, and I’m encouraged now that the first installment of \$5 million has been authorized.

At Workforce Alliance, we have put this fresh thinking at the forefront with the launch of “Skill Up for Manufacturing.” Access to additional funding means we can build on the progress we’ve made. Enrollment for our first Skill Up cohort is underway, and classes will begin on Feb. 4 at Gateway Community College. On-the-job training at employer sites will continue with job placements starting in March. Speed and real-world results are critical, and this new workforce training model is more attuned to today’s “just in time” manufacturing needs. Five key elements make this so:

It is based on a proven model -- the evidence-based, demand-driven Eastern CT Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative, which has placed more than 1,000 people into good manufacturing jobs over the past three years and resulted in approximately \$37 million in direct annual wages and roughly \$38 million in indirect annual wages. Interestingly, 78 percent of the graduates had no previous manufacturing experience.

Classroom training is cut to as little as five weeks. In light of stagnant population growth and the outmigration of Connecticut’s educated young, addressing the skills gap is logical. Making them plod through unnecessary course work is not. Once eligibility is determined, Skill Up participants enter cohorts that tackle basic trade knowledge, workplace skills and production readiness. Math skills remain imperative, and those who need it receive quick remediation.

Employers are an invested part of the solution. From Electric Boat to Sikorsky, from Wepeco Plastics to Penn Globe smart lighting, it's well-reported that Connecticut manufacturers large and small will need thousands of new workers in the next decade based on current orders alone for submarines, jet engines, helicopters and more. Jobs are going unfilled because of a mismatch of fundamental skills. We are priming candidates who will continue to learn on-the-job training at their new employers.

Targeting a wider audience. Our partnerships offer non-degree-bound students a short-term route to good jobs with a career pathway – avoiding years of unemployment or low-wage employment. It also taps a large workforce segment not typically leveraged as a source of skilled workers.

Leveraging existing assets to drive participation. The five regional workforce boards, which oversee the American Job Centers that served more than 93,000 residents last year, serve as program feeders. The Centers are actively recruiting job seekers with strong math skills who are unemployed, underemployed, or simply have never considered a career in manufacturing.

We realize the new administration will face competing demands for state funds. Real results have been demonstrated in eastern Connecticut. In the meantime, we should all agree that workforce training and Connecticut's manufacturing pipeline are a worthy of continued action. We're taking on this challenge with a positive attitude and persistence. After all, Connecticut's competitive future is on the line.

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