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Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund: Preparing Workers for Jobs in Demand

The Bristol Manufacturing Partnership brings together workforce development, vocational technical school, and employer partners to better prepare unemployed and underemployed individuals for jobs at regional manufacturing businesses. With support from a Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF) grant, the Bristol Workforce Investment Board (WIB) created a training program at two vocational technical high schools to prepare adult participants for jobs as computer numerically controlled (CNC) programmers and machinists.

A key to the success of the grant program is the active involvement of local manufacturers. Through the partnership, two employers are engaging directly with students, sharing what they look for during an interview. This activity is particularly helpful for participants with limited or no previous job experience. One employer, AccuRounds, offered to interview all program participants. This not only helps participants practice interviewing skills,

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it also helps the WIB and Fall River Career Center staff learn how to better prepare future participants for interviews.

Diane Ferrera, Director of Human Resources at AccuRounds, explains that there isn't a large pool of experienced machinists on the South Shore, which motivated them to become a grant partner. "We're all [local manufacturers] vying for the right employees. We have to invest in the community in order to get something back. This is the face of our future workforce. If we can help them do better, it helps all of us," says Ferrera.

AccuRounds has already hired one participant from the program into a full time machinist position. According to Ferrera, he has proven himself to be a driven individual, interested in furthering his skills through on-the-job training and participating in on-line simulation training.



Partnerships Working to Make Training Relevant

For more than a decade, the teachers at Bristol-Plymouth Regional and Diman Regional have been preparing teenagers for careers in manufacturing. When they started teaching unemployed adults, they learned something new. The adult students did not need the same introductory course work they used with young students to understand the foundations of what they were learning. With this new information, the teachers worked with the other WCTF partners to redesign the curriculum to put more time into CNC hands-on training instead of introductory work. This is an example of an effective partnership focused on continuous improvement and making real-time adjustments to provide relevant training that meets the needs of training participants and employers.

Crucial to the continued involvement of local manufacturers are the two vocational technical high schools, Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical School and Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School. The teachers providing training at the two schools have close ties to the region's manufacturers; they often call WIB and career center staff when they hear companies are hiring. Employers have come to recognize and trust the quality of the schools' training and teachers. This strong relationship has expanded the number of local manufacturers seeking to connect with WCTF program staff and get involved.

Bob Palmer, an instructor at Bristol-Plymouth, has been in the manufacturing industry in the Bristol area for 35 years. He learns about job openings from his many friends who own small local manufacturing shops, which he shares with the Bristol WIB and career center grant partners. Often, Palmer acts as the first screener when it comes to matching participants with open jobs. "I know which person will be the right fit for the right company," he says.

Palmer also notes that the program has made changes since it first started to better serve its adult participants. For example, Palmer is working to condense the class into fewer weeks, adding a Saturday class in addition to the four weeknight classes.

"Adults need to get working so they can support their families," says Palmer. "They're hungry to get out there and work, so we're trying to get them into jobs faster."

"It's a lot of commitment but I'm glad I took it on," says Palmer of his involvement with the grant program. "It gives me a good feeling that I'm helping people get employed."

Strong industry sector partnerships are the hallmark of the WCTF. The WCTF invests in training and education programs that focus on

preparing unemployed and underemployed individuals for jobs that are in demand. The most recent WCTF grants were awarded in 2013 and address the gap between the skills held by workers and the skills needed by employers. These grants bring together workforce investment boards, career centers, vocational technical schools, community colleges and businesses to respond to the unique regional needs of employers and job seekers.

Statewide, 75% of current enrolled WCTF participants are unemployed. The majority, 82%, of WCTF participants are classified as low-income; 41% receive public assistance of some kind. Additionally, with 59% of participants having a high school diploma or less, WCTF training focuses on middle skill job development for those who need it the most.

The grant awarded to the Bristol WIB to support the Bristol Manufacturing Partnership is one of 15 sector partnerships across the state. The 15 partnerships involve more than 100 businesses and have served 753 job seekers to date.

WCTF programs play an important role, training underserved populations for jobs that are in demand. Statewide, 75% of current enrolled WCTF participants are unemployed. The majority, 82%, of WCTF participants are classified as low-income; 41% receive public assistance of some kind. Additionally, with 59% of participants having a high school diploma or less, WCTF training focuses on middle skill job development for those who need it the most. Strong partnerships with local employers ensure that there are real jobs at the end of the WCTF training program and that the skills of the participants match the employers' workforce needs.