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CWP Joins with State Senator Saud Anwar and other Leaders to Discuss the Future of Connecticut's Workforce Post COVID-19

HARTFORD, CONN. (September 14, 2020) – Capital Workforce Partners (CWP) joined with other leaders on September 10 in an evening webinar discussion moderated by Senator Saud Anwar (D-South Windsor) to share ideas on the future of Connecticut’s Workforce post COVID-19.

“This pandemic has had an impact on everyone,” said Senator Anwar. “Some of our friends have been impacted by the health issue. I can tell you, with respect to the economic impact, people in our entire state have been affected.”

As this pandemic has impacted individuals and businesses and changed the way business is conducted, the entire state has had to reassess how things have been done up to now. “With challenges also come opportunity,” Senator Anwar added. “One of the strengths of our state is that we have a resilient community. We also have ingenuity and innovation in our blood, and that has allowed us to retool ourselves.”

The panelists joined the legislator to examine how the state can recover economically and identify the workforce needs that we will have to address. Representing CWP in the discussion was President & CEO Alex Johnson, Chief Strategy Officer Jim Boucher and Strategic Development & Initiative Specialist Benjamin Hensley. Additional panelists included: Kelli-Marie Vallieres, Executive Director of the Workforce Development Unit of the Department of Economic and Community Dev and Vice-Chair of the Governor’s Workforce Council (GWC); Mark Scheinberg, President of Goodwin College; and Jay Williams, President of Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and GWC member.

It is now generally believed that the pandemic will end in the coming year, given the estimated timing for development and testing of a safe and effective vaccine and determining appropriate medical treatments. As thousands of residents were already out of work or under-skilled prior to the pandemic reaching Connecticut, however, this crisis only exacerbated an already alarming situation.

“Those individuals who were suffering the most prior to COVID are those who are being affected the most now,” said Johnson. “It is important that we begin to marshal the assets of our state and our communities to begin to have a hard strategy to respond to these particular challenges.”

Boucher and Hensley set the context for the webinar by walking attendees through a labor market presentation entitled, “CT’s Workforce Needs Post-pandemic & Restarting the Economy.” The analysis was conducted by CWP and highlights some of the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, including the fact that processed continued unemployment insurance (UI) claims between March 1 and August 2, 2020 have disproportionately impacted those with the lowest income and educational attainment:

- Retail, Accommodation & Food Services, Healthcare (certain occupations) are among the hardest hit sectors for continued UI claims;
- Individuals with high school degree or less education levels are the most populous group of claimants;
- The lowest wage earners have been the most impacted, with individuals earning less than \$35,000 comprising nearly two-thirds (64%) of claimants; and
- Communities of color have been disproportionately impacted.

“These findings collectively indicate that the most vulnerable populations have been the most directly impacted by COVID-19,” said Boucher, who then pointed to several additional critical needs to support workforce development:

- A large population of returning citizens need reentry and employment and training supports;
- There are significant numbers of individuals with multiple barriers to education and employment;
- Many graduating high school seniors have a need for additional post-secondary bridging supports;
- Greater attention is needed to create innovative career pathways in community health & public service for Opportunity Youth and other underserved populations (e.g., public service corps, community healthcare corps); and
- A significant need exists for high-quality virtual tools and training options along with technology supports.

The presentation, which can be found on CWP’s homepage at capitalworkforce.org, also highlighted that Manufacturing has shown modest decreases in employment, comparatively, without current signs of hiring recovery. Boucher did add that Manufacturing is looking to recover by late 2021. More rapid recovery, however, has occurred among middle-skilled occupations and is occurring in some Healthcare positions and the IT, Transportation and Logistics sectors.

With the need to fill positions in the rapidly recovering industries, Vallieres’ Workforce Development Unit has been launching programs statewide to create opportunities for individuals to build new skillsets in order to reenter the workforce and secure good paying, in-demand jobs. The SkillUp Connecticut program set up access to online learning through Matrix Learning, which offers more than 5,000 online courses with industry-recognizable credentials. Additional programs through 180 Skills will prepare individuals for entry-level positions in Manufacturing.

“We knew immediately, early Spring, that we needed to do something to enable our Connecticut residents the opportunity to skill up and that the recovery was going to enable them to take some of the skills that they were able to skill up on during their time on unemployment to help them land in more secure, higher paying positions as the recovery takes place,” said Vallieres. “We have over 10,000 residents who are engaging in online [courses] right now.”

According to Johnson, CWP’s chief priority as the pandemic hit the region was to “maintain its system as being open” when the Governor had, in effect, closed the state. “At the same time,” Johnson added, “there were hundreds of thousands of individuals who were being laid off and needed to have some access points to begin to think about how they were going to retool themselves and reenter the labor force.”

Each year millions of Americans receive career guidance, job placement, and business services from the nation’s “One-Stop Career Centers” known as the American Job Center Network. In the 37 towns within CWP’s North Central region of the state, there are seven American Job Center (AJC) locations – East Hartford (in partnership with Goodwin University), Hartford, Hartford Satellite (Hartford Public Library), New Britain, Manchester, Enfield (in partnership with Asnuntuck Community College), and Bristol (in partnership with Tunxis Community College).

Each of these AJC locations has remained operational since the pandemic began. “We had to effectively convert what was a center-based model to a virtual service model to continue to provide access points to both jobseekers and employers. Even in the height of the pandemic, employers were still looking to fill jobs and individuals with skills looking for opportunities and direction,” said Johnson.

Johnson added that CWP has been fortunate to receive some additional resources from Governor Ned Lamont through the CARES Act. CWP will be working with employers to serve 400 individuals to help them receive relevant training to find a pathway to jobs in Healthcare, IT, Business Services and Financial sectors, Transportation, Construction and Manufacturing. Some of these individuals will be part of a statewide initiative in partnership with Social Venture Partners and Community Resources, Inc. The balance of 358 will be individuals who are located in North Central Connecticut.

“So, we are trying to continue providing training where there is demand and where employers are telling us that if we train them, that there is a job at the end of the tunnel for them,” Johnson said. “That is one of the conditions that we made when we applied for this money to the Governor’s Workforce Council.” The resources, which end at the end of this calendar year, enable CWP to reduce barriers for individuals and provide comprehensive support services throughout the program, including a \$200 per week, on average, stipend, transportation assistance, access to childcare and access to a laptop.

“We are looking at, properly, something like a two-step process where someone is taking short-term training, trying to get their feet safely to a place to where they can at least maintain themselves while they take it to the next level,” said Goodwin University President Mark Scheinberg. “I think that is a very thoughtful approach.”

Johnson reiterated the alarming fact that individuals earning less than \$35,000 have been affected the most by this crisis. “That’s a big issue,” Johnson said. “That is an issue that we really have to be able to ensure that not only are we getting people back to work, but that we are providing them with the skills so that they can compete for middle-skilled jobs...and those are the jobs that were least affected by this COVID environment. Those are the jobs that provide maximum opportunities to work from home.”

“There is a lot of enthusiasm and support, but it has to translate into action and policy and resources, so at the end of the day we have to use this as an opportunity to reshape the system and provide the necessary funding where it is critically important to do that,” Johnson added. Hartford Foundation for Public Giving President Jay Williams stressed that partnerships are essential. “We do believe that there is an opportunity to leverage the resources that we have with other partners, with other practitioners who actually [deliver] these programs and bring them to life for the benefit of the community.”

The slate of panelists all agreed that Connecticut must continue to uncover new ways to collaborate and support workers struggling in the midst of the pandemic and help them prepare for life after COVID-19. “I think that crises define us. They define us as communities, as individuals, they define all of us,” said Scheinberg. “How we will react to what is happening economically and how we will react to what is happening racially will define us...It’s not about any of us. It’s about how we are serving the world right now.”

About Capital Workforce Partners – As the state’s Regional Workforce Development Board for 37 municipalities in North Central Connecticut, CWP’s mission is to leverage public and private resources to produce skilled workers for a competitive regional economy. CWP strives to implement and coordinate an effective Workforce Development System that creates economic and employment partnerships among service providers, job seekers and employers in a way that enhances the economic vitality of all. CWP invests in youth and future workforce development, develops sustainable career paths for adult workers, and assists employers in targeted industries through a variety of programs and services provided through the American Job Center network. CWP is a 501 (c)3, private, non-profit organization. Visit www.capitalworkforce.org for more information.

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