

# BANGOR DAILY NEWS

## Maine's businesses need a skills partnership with Washington



The Front Street Shipyard in Belfast has installed a new 485-ton capacity lift (pictured here), the largest north of Rhode Island, to be able to work on larger boats and superyachts.

By Susan Swanton and Tuesdi Woodworth, Special to the BDN  
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Maine could face a greater skills shortage if we don't act soon. According to the National Skills Coalition, middle-skill jobs — positions that require more than a high school diploma, but not necessarily a four-year degree — make up nearly half of the jobs in Maine, but only 44 percent of workers have the skills to fill these jobs.

These make up the largest portion of the jobs in the marine trades. Boatbuilding and other marine trades require advanced training and certifications that are costly for Mainers and their employers. But we're taking the helm and figuring out ways to work together to address these skills challenges.

For many years the Maine Marine Trades Association has worked with its member businesses and a wide array of partners including training providers, state and federal agencies, and other nonprofits to deliver high-demand training in Maine. By understanding the need and coordinating the effort we have been able to bring these often costly trainings to Maine at a reduced rate to employers. This collaboration has

helped more workers access needed trainings, their employers have saved money, and local economies have benefited from having students and instructors patronizing establishments such as hotels and restaurants.

We can and are playing a leading role on the ground to shape the workforce strategies that can keep pace with the needs of the local marine trades industry. But we need Washington to partner with us to make sure enough local young people and both working and unemployed adults have access to education and training that will qualify them for jobs in our industry.

Federal workforce programs do not provide dedicated support to create and grow these industry-based workforce partnerships. In the past, there has been unanimous, bipartisan support for such industry-led partnerships in Congress — but the current gridlock in Washington has allowed this common-sense approach to our nation's skills gap to fall by the wayside. However, we have a champion of these efforts in U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine.

Collins is cosponsoring the Strengthening Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success, or SECTORS Act, in the Senate. This bipartisan legislation would dedicate federal funding to the creation of industry-led partnerships that will better align employment and job training services with the needs of in-demand industries.

This isn't the first time we've invested in partnerships to grow our industries.

In 2006, Maine received a \$14.4 million federal grant through the Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development, or WIRED, program from the U.S. Department of Labor. This grant allowed the creation of Maine's North Star Alliance, which brought together the region's boatbuilding industry and shored it up with increased workforce training, business development and research and development to set the stage for future growth. The effort was a huge success, it provided training for 1,879 Maine residents, helped industry create more than 500 new jobs and brought together the full power of partners such as the Landing School in Arundel, The Boat School in Eastport, the Maine Community College and University systems, and three state agencies — the departments of Labor, Economic and Community Development and Education.

With the economy still recovering, businesses struggling to find skilled workers and nearly 12 million people out of work nationally, we applaud Collins for her commitment to supporting legislation that makes the right investments with our public dollars to close the skills gap and provide us the skilled workers we need. Businesses need lawmakers in Washington to work together and pass the SECTORS Act, a proven solution to aligning employment and training programs with the skills businesses need.

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