

RI BUSINESS

Labor Secretary Walsh says job training in Rhode Island could be scaled nationally

He touted President Biden's Build Back Better plan and investments in workforce development programs

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 1, 2021, 3:33 p.m.



Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh traveled to Rhode Island on Monday to speak with workers, union leaders and employers. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — Bringing back jobs to American shores and investing in workforce development programs will be critical for the labor force and to relieve the current

stress on the supply chain, Labor Secretary Martin J. Walsh told The Boston Globe Monday.

“We have such an opportunity for our community college system around the country to really scale it up,” said Walsh. “It could be submarines, it could be electric vehicles . . . and wind turbines and solar panels. President Biden is very focused on becoming more dependent on American manufacturing and less dependent on foreign manufacturers.”

He added, “But we have a lot of work to do to create opportunity.”

Walsh was taken on a whirlwind trip through Rhode Island, including a tour of the Warwick campus of the New England Institute of Technology in the morning with members of the Rhode Island delegation. He later traveled to Providence to [Building Futures](#), an apprenticeship program in the building trades that ultimately leads to job placement, where he spoke to students.



Alexa Gagosz ✓
@AlexaGagosz



Andrew Cortés, the executive director of [@goapprenticeRI](#), introduces their “earn while you learn” model to [@SecMartyWalsh](#), which 75% of its clients are people of color and most come from low-income backgrounds.

“This is a path to middle class,” he said. [@Globe_RI](#)



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“We know this ‘earn while you learn’ model makes sense,” said Andrew Cortés, the executive director of the program. Most of the students come from low-income backgrounds and 75 percent are people of color, Cortés added. The program is “a genuine pathway to middle class,” he said.

After the tour, Walsh spoke highly of the program and said, “I don’t think I’ve seen a building trade program quite like that in the country. And I created one in Boston.”

Walsh later joined a roundtable with Governor Dan McKee, Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training director Matt Weldon, union leaders, and community advocates. Walsh listened as each person at the roundtable voiced their concerns about getting people back to work, which included the lack of affordable child care, further investments in infrastructure, boosting low wages, and burnout.

 **Secretary Marty Walsh** 
@SecMartyWalsh 

Organizations like Building Futures expand local apprenticeship and training opportunities for youth.

This is what the [#BuildBackBetter](#) framework can accomplish across the nation: by investing in local workforces, we can boost local economies and take on the 21st century.



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Walsh, who was previously Boston’s mayor, said recent job reports haven’t looked “so good” as there’s more than 5 million openings in the country. In Rhode Island, the state launched the Back to Work R.I. program in 2020, which utilizes CARES Act funds to help workers displaced by the coronavirus pandemic get the training and resources they need to be placed in new careers.

“People haven’t gone back to work. A lot of that has to do with the lack of child care. And in Build Back Better (which includes universal pre-kindergarten), we make an investment in child care that this country has never seen before,” said Walsh. “These are jobs we need for the future. We have a nursing shortage coming up. We have a welding shortage right now. We’re going to have other shortages, and so now is the time to jump on it.”

Throughout the country, Walsh said he’s seen more unionized workforces going back to work, which are more likely to have benefits such as health care and pensions. Others, he said, who are not always unionized, have to spend half of their weekly earnings on child care, including frontline health care workers.

“We do need to push the wages up,” he said. “We expect these people to take care of our parents, of our loved ones . . . but are paying them \$12 an hour. That’s not fair.

“We need to rebuild and stabilize. Recruitment is a big problem and then we have people walking out the door everyday,” said Patrick Quinn, the executive vice president of Service Employees International Union District 1199 New England (SEIU 1199), which represents registered nurses, clerical staff, nurses aides and assistants, service workers, maintenance workers, mental health workers, therapists, therapy assistants, and other professionals. “Just because you can pay people less money doesn’t mean you should.”

Walsh assured the members of the roundtable the United States is on a verge of a “breakthrough” with the Build Back Better plan. He said it was going to lift up those who have previously been forgotten in workforce development programs, and specifically for women and people of color.

Of the plan, he said, “It’s not what everyone wished for in the beginning. But it’s a hell of a start.”

Alexa Gagosz can be reached at alexa.gagosz@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@alexagagosz](https://twitter.com/alexagagosz).

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