Esty introduces workforce development bills

By SCOTT WHIPPLE
STAFF WRITER

U.S. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, D-5th District, has introduced two bills designed to boost workforce development and STEM education in Connecticut and nationwide.

They were introduced last week and referred to the Committee on Science, Space and Technology on which she serves. The first was also referred to the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

Both bills must be passed from committee, passed by the full House, passed by the Senate and signed by the president to become law. Esty said she will be talking with colleagues in both parties to build support, particularly fellow members on the SST Committee and the bipartisan House Manufacturing Caucus.

The bills are the culmination of Esty's several visits to manufacturers in her district since taking office as well as a roundtable she held on workforce development in New Britain in August.

"Manufacturers and small businesses in Connecticut and across the country need policies that will help them create well-paying jobs and hire new workers," the congresswoman said, speaking by phone from Washington. "That's all the more reason we need to end this irresponsible shutdown and start passing some real jobs bills."

Johnny Burnham | Staff

Congresswoman Elizabeth Esty speaks with two attendees of Tuesday's financial aid workshop at CCSU.

In August, New Britain Mayor Timothy O'Brien said one of his objectives was to make the city "an attractive place to grow and attract skilled workers. We're building a workforce that will enable local companies to be successful."

During a roundtable meeting, Charles LaConche, regional AFL-CIO business manager, told Esty that "something needs to be done to keep jobs in Connecticut."

Esty believes both bills will help meet these objectives.

As she visited manufacturers in her district, the congresswoman heard again and again from employers and employees about the need to boost workforce training and STEM education. The latter would ensure that young people have the skills needed to succeed in the high-tech manufacturing sector.

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>
> CONGRESSWOMAN ELIZABETH ESTY

"Manufacturers and educators have made it abundantly clear that boosting workforce development will require making sure our teachers have the resources and support they need to help kids excel in the STEM fields, which are driving job growth in the U.S.," Esty said. "It will also mean doing more to help link our unemployed and underemployed workforce with employers."

The STEM Jobs Act and First STEP Act are designed to address these needs, to help ensure that young people in Connecticut and elsewhere will be well-prepared for the high-tech manufacturing jobs of the future.

The STEM Jobs Act would help enhance teacher professional development programs at the National Science Foundation and the Department of Education to support teachers in the critical STEM fields.

The First STEP Act would ensure that students in the state's technical high schools, community colleges, and apprenticeship programs can earn nationally-recognized credentials to match their skill sets with jobs in demand.

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Tenet to work with state for Bristol Hospital deal

Continued from Page 1

originally made with Nashville-based Vanguard Health Systems, which was purchased last week by Dallas-based Tenet. The Vanguard name is being phased out, but Trip Pilgrim, Vanguard's chief development officer, said the sale would not affect the company's plans in Connecticut.

Since the governor's veto, "we have been looking for an interim solution that can get us to effectively the same point," Pilgrim said. "We are focusing on right now on an interim solution with our partner [Yale New Haven Health]."

The legislature showed a good deal of bipartisan support, "so the real task at hand is to work closely with the governor's office to provide them comfort with what we're doing," he said. "Ultimately we are going to need a permanent fix to that statute, and I think we will be able to get there with the governor."

"Gov. Malloy is very supportive of Bristol Hospital and has been having productive conversations with its executives regarding its future," said David Bednarz, spokesman for the governor.

Pilgrim said Tenet needs to file a Certificate of Need application with the state and have the interim solution reviewed by the attorney general before it can go forward. He estimated the process would take about six months.

Vanguard was originally created in 1997-98 by a group of health care professionals who wanted to develop a more efficient health care model in the United States, Pilgrim said. Tenet shares a very similar corporate view of using regional economies of scale to meet the evolving health care environment, he noted.

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"Vanguard has 28 hospitals and $6 billion in revenue. Tenet $10 billion in revenue and 49 hospitals," he said. "The combined platform is a stronger platform."

Pilgrim said that Connecticut does not have a lot of experience with for-profits so there are naturally a lot of concerns here.

He listed some of the differences: For-profits pay taxes — local property taxes, sales taxes, income taxes — while not-for-profits do not. For-profits have access to capital markets, so they are more flexible in obtaining capital than not-for-profits, which can only borrow capital.

Critics say for-profits take their profits out the communities and cut staff and quality to boost profits. However, Pilgrim said, Vanguard doesn't pay dividends, and it reinvests in all the markets where it has a presence.

He cited the example of San Antonio where Vanguard bought a health care system in 2002.

"After 10 years of owning that system we've put more than $900 million in capital into San Antonio, Texas," he said. "It had 4,300 employees when we bought the system and it's got about 6,000 now."

"We've grown in market share [there]. We've grown service-wise," he continued. "We replaced a hospital that was in the most socio-economically challenged part of the county. That was a hospital that other entities that looked at that system said they were going to close."

Vincent Petrini, senior vide president of public affairs for Yale New Haven Health, said the strategic partnership his health care system has developed with Vanguard has already helped preserve local and regional access to high-quality care in a cost-efficient way.

"We're the largest health system in the state of Connecticut," Petrini said. "Our flagship, Yale New Haven, depending on who you talk to, is the fourth or fifth largest hospital in the nation now."

Kurt Barwis, Bristol Hospital CEO, said the hospital facility is old and needs a lot of outside investment.

"We also recognized the ever-changing environment of health care and the board of this hospital really spent a lot of time thinking about the future and positioning Bristol Hospital to keep it fulfilling its mission as one of the largest employers in the area, and providing access to care in the area," Barwis added.

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