

HOLYOKE

HCC offers free human services certificate program



Sisters Alezza and Oceana Maldonado, of Holyoke, were participants in the inaugural cohort of Holyoke Community College's free human services certificate program. (SUBMITTED PHOTO)

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Holyoke Community College is offering 30 full-time slots for a free Human Services Internship Program spanning two semesters, starting this fall.

A grant fully covers tuition, fees, books and supplies. The program also includes a paid internship at local social service partners, such as Gandara Center, Craig's Doors, Mental Health Association and Jewish Family Services of Western Massachusetts.

Donna Rowe, chair of the college's human services program, said that its objective is to expedite students' transition into the workforce.

"It's wonderful that these four agencies have made this agreement with us. They're looking for workers, and we have students looking to get into the field," Rowe said.

Students will save about \$5,384 each semester, and during the second-semester internship, they will gain

practical experience and earn a stipend of \$2,500, which equates to \$20 per hour for a 10-hour workweek.

Additionally, students have the option to apply the 24-credit human services certificate toward an associate degree in the same field. This pathway also could lead to obtaining a bachelor's degree in social work from a four-year institution.

The program started last fall, after Holyoke Community College's receipt of a \$1.28 million grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, which was specifically intended to tackle the worker shortage in the human services sector.

A 2018 report by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission highlighted a shortfall of about 600 social and human service workers in Western Massachusetts, a gap that expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Amy Brandt, the dean of health sciences at HCC, said the grant represents a significant investment, with the potential to meet the needs of local agencies.

“It’s a challenge for agencies who have a variety of workers at different levels. They don’t have a lot of additional resources to develop that talent pool. They really are on shoestring budgets trying to provide services to the community,” Brandt said.

The human services industry offers a diverse range of career opportunities, encompassing roles in child care, elder care, youth services, homelessness support, and substance use disorder and mental health treatment.

Brandt said the program has the potential to set students up for lifelong learning and career advancement, said Brandt.

Sisters Alezza and Oceana Maldonado, of Holyoke, were among the first group of students to complete the free human services certificate program at HCC earlier this month.

Alezza, currently employed at One Holyoke, said the program presents an ideal chance to acquire additional skills and advance in a career.

“It is a well-developed program, and we had 100 percent support from the HCC faculty and staff. I think anyone would thrive in the program, even if they had been out of school for a long time,” she said.

Crystal Kenyon, of Monson, a program graduate, works now as an assistant in the case management department at Baystate Wing Hospital in Palmer.

She said having a positive effect in people’s lives has been rewarding and meaningful.