

EDUCATION

LOCAL COLLEGES IN THE NEWS



Stefan B. Davis, CEO and president of the Springfield-based I Found the Light Against All Odds Foundation, left, and HCC President George Timmons sign a memorandum of understanding between the two organizations, while I Found Light consumers Shakyra Higgs, back left, and Alisandra Pantoja, both of Springfield, look on. Pantoja will be attending HCC in September.

HCC, Nonprofit Agree to Boost Support for Young Women At Risk

HOLYOKE - Representatives from Holyoke Community College and the Springfield-based nonprofit I Found the Light Against All Odds Foundation agreed this week to work closely to increase educational and workforce training opportunities for young women at risk for homelessness.

HCC President George Timmons and Stefan B. Davis, CEO, president and founder of the Springfield-based I Found the Light Against All Odds Foundation, met at the college on Tuesday, April 30, to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining the terms of the agreement.

I Found the Light Against All Odds Foundation provides support services for young women to help address social and economic issues that can lead to poverty and homelessness. Specifically, by signing this MOU, HCC and the foundation agree to

broaden support services for area women, age 18-20, to help them obtain safe housing and career opportunities through education and training.

"This agreement is firmly in line with HCC's mission and vision to remove barriers to student success," said Timmons, "to break cycles of poverty and provide opportunities for education and training that will allow more young women to be successful, earn a livable wage, and enjoy all that life has to offer."

According to statistics cited in the MOU, Hampden County has a poverty rate of 16.9 percent, which is higher than the national average of 11.5 percent. Meanwhile, the poverty rates in Springfield and Holyoke are even higher at 25.5 percent and 26 percent, respectively.

"At the same time, research shows that many community college students

in Massachusetts experience hunger and/or homelessness, as well as other types of basic needs insecurity that can serve as barriers to degree completion and thereby limit economic sustainability and mobility," the MOU states.

"Thank you, Dr. Timmons and faculty and staff from Holyoke Community College for accepting us as being part of your family," said Davis. "We look forward to working with you and your staff to help these young women that are in darkness, searching for light and education. These women have dealt with a lot of trauma throughout their lives and are looking for ways to end the cycle of poverty. This collaboration proves that we care about them and that they have our support."

Through the agreement, the foundation is looking to connect with HCC's existing academic support services, such as admissions and financial

aid counseling, as well as career and transfer advising, and more.

"It's a real natural fit between an agency that works to support young women and a college, HCC, which is known for its wraparound support model," said Jeff Hayden, HCC vice president of Business and Community Services.

Before the signing, Davis introduced a video about the I Found Light Against All Odds Foundation that featured interviews from two of its consumers. One of them was Alisandra Pantoja from Springfield, who attended Tuesday's event.

Pantoja stood beside Davis as he put pen to paper. She will be taking advantage of all the opportunities outlined in the agreement as a student at HCC starting in September. She said she plans to major in human services. "I like working with people," she said. ■