

Child-watch service will open at HCC

HOLYOKE — Holyoke Community College will soon introduce a free, drop-in child-watch program for parents who need safe and affordable supervision for their children while they tend to their college studies.

When the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch opens in March, HCC will be just the second community college in the state, and the only one in Western Massachusetts, to offer a child watch service for its students.

"As part of our strategic plan, we've been focused a lot on basic needs," said college President Christina Royal, "and one of those basic needs is child care."

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch will offer free, short-term care to children six weeks to 12 years old, provided their parents sign up in advance and remain inside on the Homestead Avenue campus. Parents will be given a restaurant pager to alert them to return if necessary.

"It's not our goal to be in the daycare business," Royal said. "Our goal is to be able to serve our students by providing short-term child watch they can access while they attend class or a tutoring session or other educational supports. That is our focus, and it's been a long road to get here."

The pilot phase is being funded through a \$100,000 allocation in the 2022 Massachusetts budget secured by state Sen. John Velis, D-Westfield.

"For parents looking to begin or support their education, finding reliable child care is always a barrier," Velis said. "This new program will help make a real difference in the lives of so many families, and I am proud I was able to advocate for HCC to receive these funds."

HCC is in the process of hiring an interim director to get the child watch program up and running. Many of the details still need to be worked out, such as days and hours of operation.

"We're going to determine hours based on student needs," said Sheila Gould, director of HCC's Early Childhood Education program. "Our hope is that in the future, our academic departments will align their courses to run when the child watch is open."



Professor Sheila Gould, director of Holyoke Community College's Early Childhood Education program, sits in the college's Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab. This spring, HCC will introduce a free, drop-in child care service called the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch. (SUBMITTED / HCC)

Gould, also an HCC professor, was part of the team that put together the child watch proposal. While the idea for an on-campus child watch program had been kicking around for a few years, it gained more momentum during the pandemic, when many childcare centers shut down, some never to reopen.

"As a mom myself and a mom who is still going to school, child care is a barrier," said Gould, who lives in Holyoke. "It's a real barrier. The more I got involved working here and advising, the more stories I heard from students who couldn't take a class or had to drop a class or had too many absences because of child care issues."

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch takes its name from the classic children's book, "The Itsy Bitsy Spider," a name that was also borrowed for the Itsy Bitsy Zoomcast, a recorded series focused on early education co-hosted by Gould and Liz Charland-Tait, lead coach for the Strong Start Early Childhood Education Professional Development Center at HCC.

The Itsy Bitsy Child Watch will be located on the first floor of the Marieb Building, in a corner space that had been a child care

center back in the 1970s, not long after HCC opened the Homestead Avenue campus.

"Historically, it was a preschool, so it's kind of exciting to bring this life back to that space," Gould said.

Equipment is on order. The décor and furnishings will closely match what is now in HCC's Itsy Bitsy Learning Lab, an early education program space set up to mimic a preschool, with child-size tables, play areas, and book nooks.

"Our plan is to create an advisory team to make sure everything that happens in the child watch program is the highest quality," said Gould.

"Kids will get the absolute best in terms of interactions and access to activities and developmentally appropriate materials for all ages."

Gould also expects that the child watch center will provide work-study positions and other opportunities for students interested in early education or elementary education.

"Students will be able to invent activities that can come to life in the child watch program, so there is also the potential for service-learning projects," she said.