

# Velis to help HCC launch free child watch program



*Leslie Klein Pilder of Florence is the inaugural director of HCC's free Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center. The college is holding a ribbon-cutting celebration to launch the center on Wednesday. (SUBMITTED / HCC)*

HOLYOKE — Holyoke Community College will celebrate the launch of its free Itsy Bitsy Child Watch program on Wednesday, May 4, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by state Sen. John Velis, D-Westfield, who was instrumental in securing the funds for the pilot project.

The celebration will begin at 10 a.m. in the new Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center, Room 130, on the first floor of the Marieb Building on the main HCC campus, 303 Homestead Ave., Holyoke.

"This will be a joyful day," said Sheila Gould, director of HCC's Early Childhood Education program. "We will celebrate with finger paint, chalk, bubbles and itsy bitsy scissors to cut the ribbon. The ribbon-cutting signifies a big step for HCC as we culminate years of work to bring this service to our students. It shows that HCC continues to support the whole student and that we aim to directly remove barriers to student success."

The event will also be an opportunity

to introduce the inaugural director of the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center, Leslie Klein Pilder of Florence, a long-time early childhood educator and the recently retired executive director of Nonotuck Community School in Northampton.

"With Leslie in place as the director, we are ready and eager to welcome the children of our students," said Gould. "The space looks beautiful and welcoming. The policies and procedures Leslie has designed ensure that our students will know their children will be safe, loved, and have a great time while on campus."

HCC's free, drop-in child watch program is for student-parents who need safe and affordable supervision for their children while they tend to their college studies. Once the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch opens, 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, and one of those basic needs is child care," said college President Christina Royal, who will also attend the ribbon-cutting.

The pilot phase of the program is being funded through a \$100,000 allocation in the 2022 Massachusetts budget secured by Velis.

"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."

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.