

HCC to expand Community Health Worker program

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College has been awarded a grant of more than \$400,000 from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration to expand its Community Health Worker program in partnership with area employers.

The four-year, \$431,227 allocation will enable approximately 120 people to take a series of three credit-bearing classes to enhance their education and training as community health workers.

The three classes — free for those accepted into the grant program — were selected in consultation with representatives from Behavioral Health Network and the Gandara Center, two regional behavioral health nonprofit agencies.

“We’re partnering with BHN and Gandara, and they’re sending a bunch of their current staff who are already working in various capacities with

clients,” said Rebecca Lewis, chair of HCC’s Foundations of Health program. “There’s been interest from a lot of different employers.”

The grant was awarded through HRSA’s Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training division. HRSA is part of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

The initial cohort of 27 students will take the first of three required classes during the spring 2018 semester, “Core Competencies for Community Health Workers.” That introductory course will be followed over the summer with the second, where students will have a choice of either “Children’s Behavioral Health” or a more general “Essential Health for Community Health Workers” course. The third class, to be completed in the fall, is a practicum with an area employer.

Lewis said the Mass. Dept. of Public Health currently has regulations pending for a state certification process for community health workers.

“The three classes align with pending regulations,” she said.

A second cohort of 30 students will begin in the fall when courses will be offered in the evenings and on Saturdays to make it more convenient for those currently working.

Community health is an emerging healthcare field and community health workers are typically employed by agencies to focus on underserved populations, conducting home visits and connecting clients with needed services. They are not nurses nor home health aids and do not provide medical care.

“Historically, community health workers are bilingual and bicultural and they’re from the communities that they serve,” said Lewis.

Upon successful completion of the three-course series, students will receive a certificate of completion that can serve as a stand-alone community health worker credential. Or, the nine HCC credits they earn can be “stacked,” that is, applied toward a full Community Health Worker certificate (26 credits), an associate degree in Foundations of Health or an associate degree in Human Services.

“Some people might want to work in a more clinical healthcare setting, like working in a health center,” Lewis said. “Some people might want to work for a social service agency.”

Two years ago, HCC became the first area institution to start a Community Health Worker certificate program with an eye toward pending state regulations that would allow the college to apply to become an official training site.
