

HOLYOKE

HCC to host legal clinic, CORI-friendly job fair

Western Mass CORE at Holyoke Community College, in partnership with Western New England School of Law's Center for Social Justice, MassHire Holyoke, and Enlace de Familias will host a criminal record expungement and sealing clinic and CORI-friendly job fair at HCC on Thursday, April 4.

The event will run from 12:30 to 4:30 p.m., with the job fair portion in the PeoplesBank Conference Room on the third floor of the Kittredge Center for Business and Workforce Development on the main HCC campus, 303 Homestead Ave. The legal clinic will take place in classrooms on the second floor or the Kittredge Center and in the adjoining HCC Campus Center.

The event is free and open to the public and will provide an opportunity for people with criminal records to get free legal advice, learn about the criminal record expungement and sealing process, obtain a free copy of their CORI report (criminal offender record information), and connect with potential employers and community and college resources.

The event coincides with the national recognition of April as "Second Chance Month," a time to reaffirm the importance of helping people re-enter society after being incarcerated.

According to Nicole Hendricks, director of Western Mass CORE, a college pathways program for incarcerated and system-impacted individuals, around 77 million, or one in three adults in America, have a criminal record, subjecting

them to countless obstacles to rebuilding their lives.

"A criminal record significantly impedes people's ability to find work, housing, and education. This creates a vicious cycle of exclusion and marginalization, making the process of reintegrating into society even more challenging," she said.

CORE was founded in 2019 by Hendricks, a professor of criminal justice at HCC, and Mary Orisich, professor of economics. CORE stands for "community, opportunity, resources, and education."

"Data indicates that our region bears the highest burden of jail and prison incarceration rates in the state," Orisich said. "According to 2020 data from the Vera Institute of Justice, Hampden County had the highest combined jail and prison incarceration rate in Massachusetts. This tells us that many residents are affected by the criminal legal system. Events like this meet a significant need in our community."

Western New England School of Law's Center for Social Justice is sending about a dozen legal volunteers, including CSJ staff attorney Gladys Vila-Carreras, retired judge and interim CSJ Director Dina Fein, and attorney Crispin Birnbaum, an Access to Justice fellow focusing on clients with criminal records, who will supervise local attorneys and student volunteers from the law school.

MassHire anticipates that representatives from more than 25 area employers will attend the job fair along with

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10 or so support service organizations.

“Many people with criminal records face challenges when it comes to finding employment,” said Ramona Rivera-Reno, executive director of the Reentry and Recovery Program at MassHire Holyoke. “A CORI-friendly job fair provides a space where people can connect with employers who are willing to consider their qualifications and skills rather than solely focus on their criminal history. Everyone deserves a fair chance to prove themselves, regardless of their background.”

The Center for Social Justice will be sending the Justice Bus, its free mobile legal clinic, which will be parked outside the Kittredge Center during the event.

“We look forward to connecting with the community and bringing our free legal kiosks and other area resources to anyone in need of legal assistance,” said Fein.



Western Mass CORE co-founder Mary Orisich, right, talks to a visitor to the expungement clinic and CORI-friendly job fair at HCC in April 2023. (PHOTO COURTESY HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

Also attending will be representatives from the Hampden County Sheriff Department’s All Inclusive Support Service program (AISS), HCC’s Culinary Arts program, HCC’s Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry, and El Centro, HCC’s support center for Hispanic and Latinx students.

There will also be free food and music.

“Criminal convictions shouldn’t be lifelong barriers to success,” said Hendricks. “We are excited to welcome a large crowd to celebrate second

chances and unlock opportunities.”

HCC will provide free transportation to campus from the Maple Street bus terminal in downtown Holyoke via La Guagua, the college’s community shuttle, and to the Kittredge Center from the bus circle in the middle of the campus.

Preregistration for the event is recommended but not required. To register, go online to hcc.edu/CORI

Please bring a Massachusetts photo ID.