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# HCC-MRC program trains disabled for cybersecurity jobs

HOLYOKE – Not long ago, Aidan Burke was working in a local supermarket, making pizza for minimum wage. It was not a job he believed held much promise for him.

Life has changed a lot since then for the 29-year-old Northampton resident.

In February, Burke started a free, intensive cybersecurity training program for people with disabilities offered by Holyoke Community College and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Ten months later, he is now poised to begin a career as a cybersecurity analyst.

Already, Burke has started an internship with NetWerks Strategic Services, an Agawam-based technology company. In recent weeks, he has interviewed for full-time benefitted positions at the Massachusetts Educational Collaborative and the Department of Youth Services. He is also a candidate for a summer internship with MassMutual.

Burke and his 14 classmates completed the Cisco Academy Cybersecurity

Training program on Dec. 10. They graduated Dec. 18, having passed their exams as Cisco Certified Network Associates and Cisco Certified Cyber-Operations Associates.

The HCC-MRC cybersecurity training program was the first of its kind in the state. Based on the success of the pilot, MRC initiated a second program in September in collaboration with Roxbury Community College and has begun recruiting for a second class at HCC that will begin in February.

For the first month of training, classes met in the cybersecurity lab in HCC's Kittredge Center for Business and Workforce Development. In March, though, they moved onto Zoom as COVID-19 forced a shift to remote instruction. HCC and MRC provided laptops for students to use at home, and Cisco provided access to online simulation platforms that mimicked the "hands-on" parts of the training.

Students qualified for the program through their involvement with MRC.

Burke was recommended by his caseworker. Candidates were screened and then took an entrance exam to make sure they could handle the material and the workload.

Classes met four days a week, Monday through Thursday from about 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Singh said the students were also required to put in several hours of additional self-study on Fridays.

Cybersecurity analysts are network watchdogs, monitoring network activity, tracking alerts, guarding against cyberattacks and looking out for abnormal network behavior. They fix security problems, restore compromised systems, pinpoint conflicts, and collect evidence of criminal activity in the event of an intentional breach or legal proceeding.

"Cyber crime is up 600 percent due to the pandemic," HCC president Christina Royal said Friday during a graduation ceremony held over Zoom. There are a lot of bad actors looking to exploit network vulnerabilities with costs estimated at \$6 trillion in 2021.

Cybersecurity is an important area that companies are needing and investing in."

Program graduates qualify for jobs as tier 1 cybersecurity analysts. Although that is considered entry level, they can still expect to earn between \$25 and \$35 an hour to start and up to \$80,000 to \$100,000 or more a year as they advance.

Beyond the training itself, students in the program received a \$200 stipend for general expenses, career counseling and assistance with job placement.

Like many of his classmates, Burke has struggled with a number of issues, including anxiety as well as depression, PTSD and ADHD. "Just a tough combination of things," he said, that made it tough at times just to get out of bed in the morning.

Burke said he's grateful to Mass Rehab for recommending him for the program and for putting him in a class with others who shared and understood his struggles. It was a big confidence builder for all of them.