

HCC plans legal clinic, job event on April 6

HOLYOKE — Western Massachusetts CORE at Holyoke Community College, in partnership with Western New England School of Law's Center for Social Justice and MassHire Holyoke, will host a criminal record expungement and sealing clinic and CORI-friendly job fair at HCC on Thursday, April 6.

The clinic and job fair will run 3-6 p.m. in HCC's Bartley Center for Athletics and Recreation on the main HCC campus, 303 Homestead Ave., Holyoke.

The event is free and open to all, 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 (criminal offender record information) report, 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 reenter society after being incarcerated.

"A criminal record can create significant barriers to employment, housing, and education," said Nicole Hendricks, co-coordinator of Western Mass. CORE, a college pathways program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. "As a program that serves people with criminal records, this touches on every aspect of somebody's life and can make it very difficult to



Western New England University's "Justice Bus" will be among the resources to aid people with criminal records at a job fair in Holyoke on April 6. (SUBMITTED)

be successful. Even a minor offense can limit opportunities to move forward."

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

"There's data showing that our particular area — Hampden County — has a disproportionate number of residents who have been impacted by the criminal legal system," said Orisich. "So this type of event speaks to 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 staff lawyer Gladys Vila-Carreras and lawyer Crispin Birnbaum,

an Access to Justice fellow focusing on clients with criminal records, who will supervise local lawyers and student volunteers from the law school.

MassHire anticipates that representatives from more than 30 area employers will attend the job fair, along with 15 or so support service organizations.

"Many individuals with criminal records face challenges when it comes to finding employment due to their criminal history," said Ramona Rivera-Reno, executive director of the Reentry and Recovery Program at MassHire Holyoke. "A CORI-friendly job fair provides a space where these individuals 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 send the Justice Bus, its free mobile legal clinic, which will be parked outside the Bartley 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 Ariel Clemmer, director of the Center for Social Justice.

Representatives will be attending from the Hampden County Sheriff Department's All Inclusive Support Service program, HCC's Culinary Arts program, HCC's Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry, and El Centro, HCC's support center for Hispanic and Latino students.

There will also be free food and music.

"This is going to be a massive event," 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 Bartley Center from the bus circle in the middle of the campus.

Advance registration for the event is recommended but not required, at hcc.edu/CORI. Attendees should bring a photo ID.