



Grants are available for helping families impacted by opioid use and abuse.

*Submitted photo*

## **Neal touts \$1.89 million to HCC for health program**

H O L Y O K E – Congressman Richard Neal visited Holyoke Community College Friday, Aug. 7, to announce the awarding of four-year, \$1.89 million federal grant aimed at helping families impacted by opioid use.

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The funds – \$399,676 in the first year – will enhance HCC’s existing Community Health Worker training program with the goal of increasing the number of CHW’s qualified to work on integrated opioid use disorder teams in area health centers in medically underserved communities.

The grant comes from the Health Resources and Service Administration (HRSA), part of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

“We all know someone who suffers from this epidemic,” Neal said during a press event outside the HCC Campus Center. “This disease touches all people from all walks of life. We must continue to work together to combat this critical public health and safety issue, and I am grateful for the good work HCC continues to do in this realm.”

HRSA’s Opioid-Impacted Family Support Program supports training programs that enhance and expand paraprofessionals knowledge, skills, and expertise. It aims to increase the number of peer support specialists and other behavioral health-related paraprofessionals who work on interprofessional teams to provide services to children whose parents are impacted by opioid use disorders and other substance use disorders, and their family members in guardianship roles.

HCC’s partners in the grant project include Behavioral Health Network, Holyoke Health Center and the MassHire Hampden Country Workforce Board.

“Funding to launch this new program could not come at a more critical

time for our community and economy,” said HCC president Christina Royal. “COVID-19 has made clear how essential community health workers are in addressing the wide range of physical, behavioral and mental health issues faced by members of our community. Through this program and with our partners, we will not only have the ability to support more families struggling with substance use, but we will also be creating more jobs in a sector central to our region’s economic growth.”

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 do not provide medical care.

Five years ago, HCC became one of the first colleges in Massachusetts to offer a community health worker certificate program, which is part of the college’s Foundations of Health program.

The funding from the grant will provide training for an additional 100 individuals (25 students and incumbent workers each academic year for four years) as CHWs in western Massachusetts.

Each participant will receive \$3,000 to help defray the cost of tuition, fees and supplies, and a \$5,000 stipend while they’re in Level 1 training.

The grant will also allow for the creation of a registered apprenticeship program with HCC’s partners that will be the first of its kind in western Massachusetts.

Students who enter an apprenticeship after they finish training are eligible for an annual stipend of \$7,500.