

PeoplesBank supports Holyoke Community College resource

When Holyoke Community College student Christopher Royster needed help repairing his credit after an incident of identity theft, he knew where to turn — the Thrive Student Resource Center at HCC.

Thrive at HCC is known mostly for providing support to students experiencing food and housing insecurity. Thrive manages HCC's food pantry and provides free grab-and-go snacks to hungry students, as well as financial management and budget planning consultations. More than that, though, Thrive staff can assist students as they negotiate the complex bureaucracies associated with a myriad of issues such as health insurance, food, housing and utility assistance, and credit repair.

Thrive coordinator Rosemary Fiedler personally made phone calls on Royster's behalf to organizations where his stolen identity had been used to open fraudulent accounts.

"Due to the assistance and expertise of Rosemary and Thrive, I was able to get the help that I needed," said Royster, a 37-year-old military veteran and psychology major from Chicopee. "I was finally able to get my name cleared and my credit has improved."

Royster spoke Tuesday, Dec. 10, at a reception acknowledging a \$50,000 donation from PeoplesBank earmarked for HCC's Thrive center. The money will be used to establish a dedicated fund for Thrive managed by the HCC Foundation,

the nonprofit fundraising corporation of Holyoke Community College.

"This gift from PeoplesBank will allow us to significantly scale up the services we provide to students," said Amanda Sbriscia, HCC's vice president of institutional advancement and executive director of the HCC Foundation. "In so many ways, Thrive at HCC addresses the emotional, physical and psychological needs of our students so they can come closer to achieving a degree and build a more stable future."

Thomas Senecal, president and chief executive officer of PeoplesBank, and other officers from the Holyoke-based bank, toured Thrive and the HCC Food Pantry before presenting a ceremonial check to HCC President Christina Royal and a real one to Sbriscia.

"This is extremely impressive. I'm overwhelmed," said Senecal. "I'm proud to be working for an organization that can do things like this. As a mutual bank, we have the ability to focus on the needs of the community, and I can tell you, standing here today, it's pretty obvious where the need is. This is certainly one of those programs that is very worthy, and I thank you for accepting this gift."

"We're so grateful, not only for your financial support but for coming and taking the time to hear about some of the work that we do," Royal said. "A lot of times when people think of Holyoke Community College, they only think about



From left to right, Thomas Senecal, president and CEO of PeoplesBank; Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal; HCC student Christopher Royster; and Amanda Sbriscia, executive director of the HCC Foundation, hold a ceremonial check representing the bank's \$50,000 donation to HCC's Thrive Student Resource Center.

Submitted photo

us as providing educational services, but our students come here and they are dealing with so many other challenges in their lives, balancing work and school and families and children and sometimes health issues. We're trying to create an environment where everybody knows Thrive is one of the resources the college offers and as a student you have access to this and everything else."

Fiedler explained that the goal of Thrive is to help students stabilize their lives so they can remain students and finish their degrees. Often, she said, it is difficult for students who are dealing with food insecurity or homelessness to ask for help.

"We're trying to normalize it," she said. "You've got to create an environment where they don't feel judged."

Royster, who has also sought Thrive's assistance on health insurance, said he didn't hesitate when Fiedler asked him to speak on Thrive's behalf.

"It's important that others know there are good programs out there that HCC offers and these programs can really help," he said. "Fortunately, Thrive was there to assist me, and I'm honored to speak for Rosemary and the rest of the Thrive staff because my credit wouldn't be where it is right now had it not been for their help and this program."