

Grant will help HCC reach former jail inmates in region

HOLYOKE — Holyoke Community College has been awarded an \$81,605 Bridges to College grant from the state Department of Higher Education to expand community outreach to adult learners who have been previously incarcerated.

Specifically, the money goes to Western Mass. CORE, an HCC program that works in partnership with the Hampden County Sheriff's Department to help incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals continue their education.

CORE stands for "community, opportunity, resources and education." The program was founded in 2019 by two HCC professors, Nicole Hendricks (criminal justice) and Mary Orisich (economics).

"Our goal is to teach classes inside jails and connect people with college who want to continue their education, and to do that requires a lot of outreach, advising, and mentoring," said Hendricks. "In the past year, we've been focusing quite a bit on post-incarceration support, working with individuals who are on supervised release or who may be working while living in a Sheriff's Department facility."

The Bridges to College grant will allow Western Mass. CORE to expand office hours, advising services and information sessions at the Hampden County Sheriff's Department's AISS facility, located in the W.W. Johnson Life Center on State Street in Springfield. AISS stands for All Inclusive Support Services (formerly After Incarceration Support Services). The grant will also support the hiring of a new community navigator position to lead this outreach work.

This is Western Mass. CORE's third Bridges to College grant as project lead. "Mary and Nicole's

commitment to this population is admirable, and I am so proud of the work they do to serve the community," said Sharale Mathis, HCC vice president of academic and student affairs.

The grant also will provide funding for Western Mass. CORE to host a series of community events, including a monthly children's story hour at the Holyoke Public Library for parents who have been previously incarcerated and their children; and community coffee hours at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute on Race Street.

On March 24, as part of the grant and in partnership with Western New England University, Western Mass. CORE will host an expungement event and CORI-friendly career fair in HCC's Bartley Center for Athletics and Recreation, where formerly incarcerated individuals will be able to consult with lawyers to help have their criminal records expunged.

"The new grant plan centers on deepening connections, building relationships, networking, and increasing college readiness," Hendricks said.

In the meantime, Western Mass. CORE will continue its work inside the Hampden County Correctional Center in Ludlow and the Western Massachusetts Regional Women's Correctional Center in Chicopee. This spring, at the Ludlow jail, Hendricks will teach a criminology course while Orisich will lead an economics class. HCC theater professor Patricia Sandoval will teach a fundamentals of acting class at the women's jail.

"That's going to be the first arts course we're offering," Hendricks said. "We will also continue to do a lot of other programming inside the jails, including book groups, which have been a powerful way to connect with students there."



Holyoke Community College professor Naomi Lesley teaches an English composition class last spring at the Hampden County Correctional Center in Ludlow through the college's Western Mass. CORE program. (SUBMITTED / HCC)