

Holyoke Community College part of team selected to train area workers for cannabis jobs

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College is part of a team selected to develop workforce-training programs for area residents who want to work in the burgeoning cannabis industry.

On Thursday, Oct. 18, a consortium consisting of HCC, the city of Holyoke and the Somerville-based Cannabis Community Care and Research Network was picked by the state's Cannabis Control Commission as a Cannabis Social Equity Training Vendor. The consortium will design training and competency-based internship/apprenticeship pilot programs for four, entry-to mid-level occupations to meet expected workforce demands of the cannabis industry in Holyoke and the surrounding region.

The four jobs are cannabis cultivation assistant, dispensary patient advocate ("bud tender"), extraction technician assistant and cannabis pantry cook/cannabis culinary assistant.

The Cannabis Control Commission is funding the effort through its Social Equity Program, which seeks to assist communities and populations dispro-

portionately affected by drug enforcement laws before the decriminalization of medicinal and recreational/adult-use marijuana in Massachusetts. After students receive core competency training they will be paired with one of more than 50 cannabis companies, academics, ancillary businesses, consultants, experts and other stakeholders who have signed on to be members of the C3RN/HCC training, internship, and apprenticeship network.

"The goal of this one-year pilot program will be to train and link students to employment opportunities in Holyoke and greater western Massachusetts," said Jeff Hayden, HCC vice president of Business and Community Services. "The purpose of this two-pronged training is to help individuals get placed in a job and to find long-term career pathways."

Hayden added that there will be no cannabis or cannabis products on the HCC campus or on any of its off-campus sites where training might take place.

"We will be training students in customer service, dosing and extraction

methods and techniques, but when it is time for students to work with actual product, that will take place offsite through our partner C3RN," he said. "As the education partner, we want to ensure that local residents and students have access to opportunities - including those in emerging industries such as cannabis - that lead to jobs."

This new-to-Massachusetts industry provides employment opportunities, especially for communities with high levels of poverty and unemployment, C3RN officials said. The team hopes to be the leaders in setting the standard for certificate training and innovative models for bringing those who have operated in the industry for decades into the new, legal and regulated market.

"The selection of Holyoke as a site for social equity training will bring lasting economic impact to our city," said Mayor Alex Morse. "We already offer the best cost profile and platform for cannabis growing in the state and adding the workforce development component will only strengthen the industry's success

here and have a positive impact on our residents."

The project scope, timelines, and next steps are subject to further negotiations with the Cannabis Control Commission.

"This is an important step in establishing an educated, informed, and standardized workforce for the cannabis industry while providing a streamlined process for employment for social equity applicants," said Miyabe Shields, PhD, director of education for C3RN. "The cannabis industry is at a critical point of its development and we are thrilled to be able to assist the CCC in creating employment opportunities and raising the bar for cannabis education across the board."

"We hope the training models produced in this project will have wide, culturally relevant, lasting, and technically sound impacts on addressing the stigma against cannabis use in Massachusetts, the U.S., and globally," said Marion McNabb, DrPh, chief executive officer of C3RN.