

Students sought for human services internships

HOLYOKE — Thanks to a \$1.28 million grant, Holyoke Community College is now recruiting students for a free new certificate and internship program intended to help address a shortage of workers in the human services industry.

The grant, from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, will cover the full cost of tuition, fees, books, and supplies for students who want to earn a certificate in human services coupled with a paid internship at one of four local social service agencies.

Partnering with HCC on the grant are the Gandara Center, ServiceNet, Mental Health Association, and Jewish Family Services.

“This program is really meant to accelerate a student’s entry into the workforce,” said Donna Rowe, chair of HCC’s human services program. “It’s wonderful that these four agencies have made this agreement with us. They’re looking for workers, and we have students looking to get into the field.”

The two-semester Social Service Internship Program will begin in the 2023-24 academic year, with up to 30 students starting this fall and another 30 next spring. Recruiting for those two classes is underway.

The human services industry presents a wide variety of career options for people who are interested in providing care to children, seniors, adolescents, the homeless, or individuals dealing with substance abuse or mental health issues.

“This is a great opportunity for students to get into this field, get their academic and their learning experiences with us and then have a placement with a community agency that could end up as a full-time paid position after their internship,” Rowe said. “Plus, their tuition and books and everything else is paid for. That’s huge.”

The total savings on attendance is estimated to be \$5,384 per semester for full-time students. During their second-semester internship, students will receive a stipend of \$2,500, which equates to roughly \$20 an hour for 10 hours a week.

A 2018 report from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission detailed a gap of some 600 social and human service workers in Western Massachusetts, a deficit that has only widened due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Staff from the Gandara Center talk to a potential employee at a recent job fair at Holyoke Community College. The Gandara Center is one of the partner agencies working with HCC on a new social service internship program. (SUBMITTED / HCC)

“There is definitely a big shortage of human service workers,” said Amy Brandt, HCC’s dean of health sciences, “and it’s a challenge for agencies who have a variety of workers at different levels. They don’t have a lot of additional resources to develop that talent pool. They really are on shoestring budgets trying to provide services to the community. When you look at this grant, it’s a huge investment that can really help fill their needs.”

The HCC Social Service Internship Program is modeled after other successful, grant-funded certificate and internship programs HCC has developed in the areas of community health and engineering.

Additionally, the grant provides for the creation of two new full-time positions, a human services certificate coordinator to focus on recruiting, planning, and academic support, and a social-services coordinator to coordinate the internships and help students with any non-academic issues that might interfere with their education.

“A lot of community college students have complicated lives that impact their success in school, for instance they might be at risk of having their power turned off or they are facing housing insecurity or child care issues,” said Brandt. “The social services coordinator is there to be somewhat of a case manager, to help students find the resources at the college or in the community they need so they can remain successful in the program.”

The 24-credit human services certificate students earn can also be “stacked” or applied toward an associate degree in human services, which could then lead to a bachelor’s degree in social work.

“The program really has the potential to set students up for lifelong learning and career advancement,” said Brandt, “and it’s also helping these social service agencies meet their needs.”

For more information or to complete a general interest form, visit hcc.edu/hsv-grant.