

# HCC celebrates opening of Homestead Market

*Campus convenience store will be first in Mass. to accept SNAP benefits*

HOLYOKE – For Luis Pinto-Jimenez, a Holyoke Community College student who relies on public transportation to go just about everywhere, food shopping can be an onerous and expensive chore.

“I take the bus,” said Pinto-Jimenez, who lives in Holyoke. “As a student who doesn’t have a car, it’s really hard finding a way to go to the supermarket. Sometimes I take the PVTA (Pioneer Valley Transit Authority) or ask a friend for a ride to save money.”

Food shopping has gotten much easier for Pinto-Jimenez since the opening of Homestead Market, HCC’s on-campus convenience store.

“As a student who volunteers a lot at HCC and spends a lot of time on campus, it’s helpful to have a store right here where I can go and get my groceries,” he said. “It’s super convenient. We all know math equations don’t make sense when you’re hungry, so I’m super grateful.”

The store, more than two years in the making, is a collaboration between the college, its food service vendor, Aramark Dining Services, and HCC’s Thrive Student Resource Center, which operates the college’s food pantry and also helps low-income students apply for food subsidies through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Once final approval is granted, Homestead Market will be the first campus store at any public college or university in Massachusetts to accept federal SNAP benefits, or what used to be called food stamps.

The market is the latest HCC effort at HCC to address food insecurity on campus.

“From a 2020 basic needs survey, we learned that 46 percent of our students experience low or very low levels of food security, far above the national average,” said HCC president Christina Royal. “Half of those who responded said that they can’t afford to eat a balanced meal. And this was pre-pandemic. We



Holyoke Community College president Christina Royal (center left) and state Rep. Pat Duffy of Holyoke (center right) hold a bag of groceries they purchased at Homestead Market to donate to low-income students at HCC, alongside Andrew Moorehouse (left), executive director of The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, and state Sen. John Velis of Westfield.

*Submitted photos*



HCC student Luis Pinto-Jimenez of Holyoke makes a purchase at Homestead Market, the college's newly opened convenience store.

know that the pandemic has exacerbated a lot of these basic needs.”

Although the market has been open since September, the college held a grand-opening, ribbon cutting celebration on Nov. 4 that was attended by area legislators and representatives from the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts.

“The opening of Homestead Market takes our work to the next level by providing students with access to fresh produce, pantry essentials and quick meals

that can be purchased with SNAP benefits,” Royal said. “This means that students who would otherwise have to find transportation from campus to buy groceries can pick up their milk, bread, eggs and other basic food items right here, and they can afford it.”

President Royal told the crowd gathered in HCC’s Center for Excellence that the initiative for opening a campus store that could accept SNAP benefits started in 2018 with HCC’s Student Senate.

“Our own student leaders identified this as a priority for themselves and their peers,” she said.

At the grand opening event, HCC student Chris Coburn spoke about how important the Thrive Center and now the market is to him as a low-income student with health issues.

“Through the Thrive Center I was able to get food stamps very quickly,” said Coburn, who lives in Springfield. “Especially being a diabetic, having access to food is very important for me to stay healthy and focus on my classes. If my blood sugar is low, I can’t really concentrate on schoolwork. If I’m hungry, it’s hard to pass a test. I just want to say thank you to everyone for helping to get this on campus.”

State Rep. Mindy Domb of Amherst, one of the lead sponsors of the “Hunger Free Campus Initiative” making its way through the state legislature, called HCC a “radical leader” in the effort to fight food insecurity in public higher education.

“When students are hungry it undermines any hope they have of achievement,” said Domb. “So whatever money we’re putting in up front for community colleges or public higher education gets sucked out by hunger. If we don’t address it, we’re just throwing money away. And we’re also treating our students like they can be thrown away.”

Laura Sylvester, legislative and community partnership coordinator for The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, talked about the importance of passing the Hunger Free Campus Initiative.

“This legislation will provide funding and guidance for colleges in Massachusetts to address student hunger,” Sylvester said. “In addition to encouraging schools to offer markets like Homestead, there are provisions for student meal-sharing programs, emergency funds to address basic needs like housing and childcare, student-led hunger task forces and so much more.”

“Homestead Market is not only the first market of its kind in the Commonwealth to accept EBT SNAP benefits,” she said, “it’s a model for every other campus to emulate.”