

Puerto Rican nurses targeted in workforce effort

Holyoke Community College is launching a pilot program to teach English language skills to nurses from Puerto Rico so they can reenter the workforce in Massachusetts.

The Western Massachusetts Pipeline for Puerto Rican Nurses project gives priority to evacuees from Hurricane Maria but is also open to other nurses from Puerto Rico who now reside in this region.

The free program, supported by a \$35,000 Nursing and Allied Health Pathways grant

from the state Department of Higher Education, will provide 108 hours of English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) classes - six hours a week for 18 weeks - for up to 30 Puerto Rican nurses who want to pursue their licenses in Massachusetts.

"There is a need for more nurses in the region," said Kermit Dunkelberg, vice president of adult basic education and workforce development. "At the same time, we have nurses from Puerto Rico who are already licensed, have experience and are living here and are not able to work in their field and typically working below

their education and training because their license doesn't apply in Massachusetts."

The ESOL classes are designed to prepare participants to pass the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam, which will qualify them to take the National Council Licensure nursing exam.

The program is based on the successful "Welcome Back" model at Bunker Hill Community College, one of HCC's partners, along with MassHire Holyoke, formerly CareerPoint. Bunker Hill established the Boston Welcome Back Center in 2005 to help immigrant and refugee nurses who had earned their

credentials outside the United States obtain their Massachusetts nursing licenses and find jobs.

"The Welcome Back Center has found that generally nurses from Puerto Rico don't need to retake any coursework," Dunkelberg said. "They need to pass the

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Kermit Dunkelberg, HCC vice president for workforce development

Nurses

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language exam, so it's primarily an English barrier and a licensing barrier, and we're addressing that."

Dunkelberg said the pilot program could be expanded in the future to include other professionals, such as teachers, who may need to improve their English to get jobs in their fields.

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hopefully the beginning of a wider look at licensure of people with credentials from Puerto Rico or from other countries so they can enter the workforce in Massachusetts more quickly," he said.

Classes are tentatively scheduled to begin by the end of this month.

Nurses from Puerto Rico who are interested in applying should contact Sheila Kelly by email to skelly@hcc.edu or call 413-552-2027 for more information.