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HOLYOKE

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Student emergency fund gets big boost

Community college requests for aid soar amid pandemic

By JACQUELYN VOGHEL
Staff Writer

HOLYOKE — In the past, the Holyoke Community College President's Student Emergency Fund would receive a steady flow of a few re-



AMANDA SBRISCIA

quests per week. But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 93% of the fund's requests for aid this year arrived after mid-March.

Now, a \$35,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts, along with donations, will enable the fund to distribute up to \$190,000 among students with financial need.

The Community Foundation grant is the largest donation the fund has received since it was established in 2017, said Amanda Sbriscia, vice president of Institutional Advancement at HCC and executive director of the HCC Foundation, and is "the exact boost we needed when our students need it the most."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, "not surprisingly, we're seeing not only more need, but that the need is individually greater," Sbriscia said. The fund now grants students \$500 in aid on average, up from around \$300 before the pandemic.

Remaining donations have come from alumni, faculty and other HCC employees, businesses and community members, Sbriscia said, with an average gift of around \$100.

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Most financial barriers that students face fall under four categories, according to Sbriscia: child care, transportation, housing and food.

"This fund now is really enabling us to meet these needs, so it's really life-changing for our students," she said.

The Springfield-based Community Foundation distributes funding from its Massachusetts COVID-19 Relief Fund to community foundations and nonprofits serving front-line workers and those most vulnerable to the pandemic's health and economic consequences — a category that many in the community don't realize includes many HCC students, Sbriscia said.

In a survey conducted in 2017, the college found that

46% percent of students polled reported that they are housing insecure, and an additional 46% said that they have "low" or "very low" food security. Amid the pandemic, these hardships are doubtless even more prevalent.

Studying remotely also imposes new barriers, Sbriscia said, such as different family dynamics, higher utility use and a need for faster, more expensive internet plans.

"This funding is enabling us to support members of our own community," Sbriscia said. "These are people who live here, work here — they're going to stay here. So providing them with the emergency support when they need it is lifting up our entire community."

Jacquelyn Voghel can be reached at jvoghel@gazettenet.com.