

## HOLYOKE

# HCC, Nuestras Raices train urban farmers

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Holyoke Community College and Nuestras Raices will train urban farmers the intricacies of modern, sustainable agriculture using former shipping containers as a freight farm.

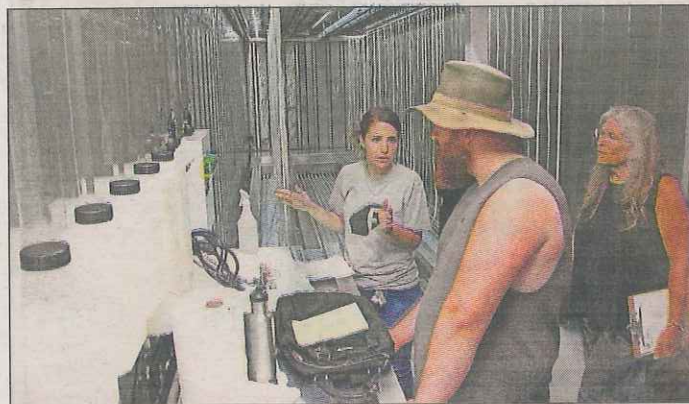
The two-year pilot program is funded through a \$208,000 MassDevelopment training initiative. The city of Holyoke also contributed \$30,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant funding to cover operational expenses for the current fiscal year.

HCC student-interns and paid farmworkers will receive training on hydroponic farming. The hired urban-farmhands will be paid \$15 an hour.

The two 40-foot-long containers reside on an empty lot a short walk from the Cubit Building on Race Street, home of the HCC-MGM Culinary Arts Institute. The containers will act like incubators to grow leafy vegetables year-round.

Insiyah Mohammad Bergeron, the innovation district manager with MassDevelopment, said the pilot program will act like a business but with a training component. Training began this week with the interns and apprentice farmers.

The first-year goal is to make the freight farm economically sustainable, using



Francesca Mazzillio, head farm manager for Freight Farms, explains some of the container farm equipment to Dylan Donicz, farm manager for Nuestras Raices and a 2015 graduate of HCC's sustainable agriculture program. Behind them is Kate Maiolatesi, HCC professor of sustainable studies and sustainable agriculture.

proceeds from future bounties to pay for operating costs. The program also received funding from the college. MassDevelopment purchased the climate-controlled containers for the program.

"We're hoping to sell produce to the local community, institutions as well as to local businesses so that the farm can run year after year," Mohammad Bergeron said. "We're excited but we're treating it as a big experiment," she said.

She eventually wants the high-tech farming approach accessible to Holyoke residents. While the hydroponic farming continues as an emerging market, operating

costs remain high. Mohammad Bergeron said the Holyoke's low electricity rates help.

Initially, herbs and lettuce will be the main crops, easy starter plants to grow.

Unlike traditional farming in New England, the freight farm has no limited growing season. She said buying local should not be relegated to spring and summer. "This allows us to build a customer base that's consistent throughout the year," she said.

The farm will be supervised by Alina Davledzarova, a 2017 HCC graduate. She will teach the interns and workers innovative growing methods, which are not soil-intensive

or reliant on large quantities of water.

She studied sustainability at HCC, which included hydroponics. "I always thought it was fascinating. It's great that we can bring that into the community," Davledzarova said, "and into urban areas where we can have farming."

Nuestras Raices, which operates a 30-acre farm and 17 community plots around Holyoke, will lead the residency recruitment.

Hilda Roque, the organization's executive director, thanked HCC, the City of Holyoke and MassDevelopment for Nuestras Raices inclusion in the program. "It enhances our mission because we have been building more greenhouses," she said. "This came as a blessing because we'll be able to grow food in the wintertime."

Roque added that 175 families participate in Nuestras Raices programs. Hydroponic farming presents a unique opportunity for those participants. "This is something

new for us as well," she said. "We'll be teaching the community another way of expanding their knowledge."

Francesca Mazzilli, of Freight Farms, opened the main container, which glowed inside with strings of bright, pink lights. She took a plastic column and attached it to a hook. The plants are grown vertically.

The seeds are wedged between special material, grow media, inside the columns. Water drips from the ceiling and dampens a saturation strip that line the column. The seedlings latch onto the grow media.

Unused water is recaptured and reused.

Though cool inside, the containers were comfortable. A nearby metal table will be used for transferring the seedlings and harvesting the plants. Mazzilli said the freight farms are sterile environments.

Depending on the crop, container farming needs tending a few days a week.