

HCC market has begun accepting SNAP benefits

HOLYOKE — With one swipe, Holyoke Community College student Luis Pinto-Jimenez made history.

On March 24, Pinto-Jimenez used his EBT card from the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance to make a purchase at HCC's Homestead Market. In so doing, he became the first student ever to use a federal food benefits card to buy groceries at one of the state's public colleges or universities.

"I'm super happy that it's all worked out after so much time," said Pinto-Jimenez, who lives in Holyoke.

In February, after many months, the U.S. Department of Agriculture finally granted HCC's request to accept SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits at Homestead Market, the college's on-campus convenience store. The DTA administers SNAP for residents of

Massachusetts. It took until March 24 to install a card reader that could link to the state's EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) system.

"It's very exciting," said HCC food services director Kevin Vincent. "It's been a tough process, but it's awesome."

The market, which opened last fall on the second floor of HCC's Frost building, is now the only campus store at any public college or university in Massachusetts to accept SNAP benefits, which used to be called food stamps.

"This is what we've been waiting for," said Mark Pronovost, HCC's former food services director, who started the process of opening Homestead Market at HCC before he retired in August 2021. Pronovost was on hand to see Pinto-Jimenez make the first swipe using his EBT card.

The store 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 SNAP benefits.

The market is the latest HCC effort to address food insecurity on campus. According to a 2020 basic needs survey, 46% of HCC students said they experience low or very low levels of food security, far above the national average. The initiative for opening a campus store that could accept SNAP benefits started in 2018 with HCC's Student Senate.

"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," college President Christina Royal said last fall at the grand opening of Homestead Market. "This means



Holyoke Community College student Luis Pinto-Jimenez uses his EBT card to buy groceries at the college's Homestead Market on March 24. (SUBMITTED / HCC)

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."

One of those students is Pinto-Jimenez, who relies on public transportation to get around.

"I take the bus," he said. "As a student who doesn't have a car, it's really hard finding a way to go to the supermarket."

Food shopping has gotten much easier for Pinto-Jimenez since the opening of Homestead Market.

"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. I'm so happy that students who need help don't have to

worry about where to go to get food."