

Grant to train community health workers

HOLYOKE – The Holyoke Community College is the lead partner in a project that will bring \$1.6 million in federal grant money to the Pioneer Valley to train community health workers in the battle against opioid addiction.

The Health Resources and Services Administration, or HRSA, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has awarded HCC \$400,000 over two years to add as many as 36 seats per year to its existing community health worker program.

In addition to core studies in community health, students in the program will receive specific instruction and training in addiction and substance abuse disorders.

Also, HCC's three regional partners, Holyoke Health Center, Community Health Center of Franklin County, and the Springfield Department of Health and Human Services, will each receive separate \$400,000 grants to support on-site practical training of those students.

"This is a really big deal," said Rebecca Lewis, chair of HCC's Foundations of Health program. "Each of the health centers is getting a huge award. Part of why we got this is because we took a regional approach. We'll be

recruiting students from all over the Pioneer Valley."

The course of study will include three classes, free to all participants. The first cohort will begin in spring 2019 with "Core Competencies for Community Health Workers," followed by "Introduction to Addiction Studies" in the summer of 2019, and concluding with a 125-hour practicum at one of the three health centers in the fall of 2019.

"This is a fantastic opportunity to leverage the resources of our academic partner, HCC, with the real-world implementation of the community health worker role," said Edward Sayer, chief executive officer of Community Health Center of Franklin County. "Health centers have been leaders in the area of integrated primary care for 50 years, so programs like these that build on developing a skilled workforce are essential to continuing the work of improving the health of our local communities."

Community health is an emerging healthcare field and community health workers are typically employed by agencies to focus on underserved populations, conducting home visits and connecting clients with needed services. They do not provide medical care.

Springfield's \$400,000 grant will go toward services at the city's Homeless Health Center.

"Community Health Workers are the critical link between our patients and the primary care system," said Helen Caulton-Harris, commissioner of the Springfield Health Department. "The value of CHW's goes beyond the care continuum; they are a trusted community advocate and voice for many who often get lost in our complex system of care. This grant enables the city of Springfield the ability to support and enhance the care our residents receive, while providing critical hands-on training that will strengthen the healthcare workforce and our response to the opioid crisis."

Upon successful completion of the three-course series, students will receive a certificate of completion that can serve as a stand-alone community health worker credential. Or, the nine HCC credits they earn can be applied toward a full Community Health Worker certificate (26 credits), an associate degree in Foundations of Health or an associate degree in Human Services.

This grant is a supplemental award to a \$431,000 grant HCC received last year from HRSA to train community

health workers focused on behavioral health.

"Because of the opiate crisis nationally, this new funding is really focused on training community health workers so they have a skillset in addiction and training that will help them identify people at risk for addiction, help get people into treatment and learn to work as part of an integrated primary-care team," Lewis said.

At HCC, the grant will allow for the hiring of a project coordinator and a professional tutor dedicated to community health worker students.

Classes will meet on Saturdays or in the evening.

"It's really focused on adult learners, incumbent workers and nontraditional students," Lewis said.

About three years ago HCC became the first area institution to start a Community Health Worker certificate program with an eye toward pending state regulations that would allow the college to apply to become an official training site. The state Department of Public Health has only recently approved standards for a voluntary state certification process for community health workers.