

HCC grant to give boost to community health workers

By DAVID McLELLAN
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HOLYOKE — For hundreds of years community health workers have performed those extra medical roles not always assigned to nurses or doctors: home visits to check on ill patients, translating doctors' orders into a patient's native language, or even providing transportation to medical appointments.

Community health work, as a field that encompasses a broad range of jobs, has never truly been standardized as far as certifying workers goes.

With a \$431,227 grant from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration, Holyoke Community College wants to be at the forefront of providing certification for community health workers in the ages-old industry.

"The Massachusetts Department of Public Health is in the process of passing regulations. Those regulations will basically put into place a certification process," said Rebecca Lewis, chairwoman of HCC's Foundations of Health program, which offers the community health certificate.

"So, even if someone has been working in the field for 20

years, but doesn't have a formal education, or someone who's younger and does have a formal education, they will both have the chance to be certified as community health workers," she said. "It's an opportunity for folks to professionalize their experience."

The Massachusetts DPH, Lewis said, has identified 10 "core competencies" — ranging from effective communication ability to "cultural responsiveness and mediation" — that will standardize what skills a community health worker needs to become certified.

In anticipation of the Massachusetts DPH core competencies becoming law, HCC is using its grant money to facilitate a three-course program for students wishing to become certified community health workers.

Students accepted into the program will take the courses for free, an expense of about \$3,000 per student through August 2021. The \$3,000 per student is funded entirely by the school's recent grant, and HCC hopes to certify about 120 students before the grant's expiration.

Students in the program will first take Core Competencies for the Community Health Worker,

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which teaches the regulations HCC is anticipating be signed into law. Next, they will choose one of two "health topics" classes, either focusing on chronic disease treatment or behavioral health in children. A practicum at a company in the industry, like Behavioral Health Network or the Gandara Center, will complete students' certification process.

While community health is a broad field, Lewis said community health workers are typically bilingual, or have a different cultural background than that of the country they are living in. Some may have unique life experiences, like a breast cancer survivor who may be assigned to work with breast cancer patients. Many community health workers are foreign-born, and they work with people of similar backgrounds, acting as a liaison between doctors, nurses and patients.

"Someone could come into the emergency room and it could be the fifth time in a month they've come in for asthma, so it's obvious they aren't doing their preventative treatment, and then the community health worker could be assigned to them," Lewis said.

"A community health worker might explain why they went five times last month," Lewis said.

Lewis said people who have foreign backgrounds and people who may be mentally ill that don't follow doctors' orders do not typically do so because they do not care, but rather because there is a lack of understanding between the patient and doctor. Community health workers can bridge that gap.

"Sometimes those really simple pieces of communication get lost because we assume people have a certain understanding," Lewis said.

Community health work is important in western Massachusetts cities like Holyoke and Springfield, where many different cultures, languages and ethnicities coexist. Community health workers can help a person with whom they identify culturally, or with whom they share similar experiences.

"What's commonly found is, the people who cost the health care system the most amount of money, it's generally not that they want to be in that position. It could be a colossal combination of many, many years of different factors that could be poverty, violence, racism," Lewis said.

Community health workers can actually reduce health care costs as a whole, Lewis said, and in Holyoke they have been educating youth about teen pregnancy.

The program at HCC is comprehensive, and even includes a simulation room, allowing community health workers to simulate visiting a client's home, identifying the issues that are present and practicing what should be done on a mannequin.

According to HCC spokesman Chris Yurko, the simulation room mannequin can be programmed to have dif-

ferent diseases, or a person in an adjacent room can use a microphone to talk through the mannequin and simulate a mentally ill or intoxicated person. The room allows students to gain experience solving a variety of different medical or mental health issues or cultural misunderstandings.

"There was a specific room set up to be like someone's home, with a man sitting at a table, smoking cigarettes, empty bottle of pills on the table, room filled with papers, sink piled with dishes," Yurko said.

According to Lewis, community health workers are increasingly common, and may work as part of a medical team, especially in a diverse area. They may work in the hospital, at clients' homes or a combination of both. This, along with anticipation that state regulations could help professionalize the field, is why local companies in the community health industry have partnered with HCC.

Behavioral Health Network; the Gandara Center; the Center for Human Development; Tapestry Health; Holyoke Pediatric Associates; Holyoke Medical Center; YOU, Inc. and Advocates are some of the organizations that have workers now enrolled at HCC.