

HCC's 'new arrivals' program offers ESOL program

HOLYOKE – In Puerto Rico, before Hurricane Maria forced thousands to flee the devastated island, Maria Crespo Santos had been working as a medical technician in a pathology laboratory and blood bank.

"I like to work with people," she said recently. "I like to work in the medical field."

The storm, however, had caused too much damage and, like so many others, she left.

"It was horrible," she said, "I don't live in Puerto Rico; I survive in Puerto Rico."

Crespo Santos, 58, moved to western Massachusetts about a year ago. She now lives with her sister in Chicopee and works in retail, but thanks to a special Holyoke Community College ESOL program for Puerto Rican evacuees like her she is on the road back to a career in the medical field.

She was one of more than two dozen students recognized for completing the five-month, English for Speakers of Other Languages program.

With her improved English skills, Crespo Santos has already been accepted into a medical assistant training program at HCC that begins in February.

"It's a pleasure and an honor to be part of this group," she said at a Dec. 20 celebration that included a feast of traditional Puerto Rican food. "The teachers and advisers have a commitment to us, and I don't quit. I have to follow my



Students, faculty and staff from HCC's Puerto Rican new arrivals program celebrate after completing classes on Dec. 20.

dreams. Follow my goals. I have challenges, but I try very hard."

The Puerto Rican New Arrivals Program started July 23 and concluded Dec. 20 with a recognition ceremony and feast at HCC's Picknelly Adult and Family Education Center (PAFEC) in downtown Holyoke. The HCC division of Business and Community Services offered the free ESOL program specifically for residents of Puerto Rico who left the island after Hurricane Maria and relocated to western Massachusetts.

Classes were held Mondays through Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and funded through a National Dislocated Worker

grant administered by the MassHire Hampden County Workforce Board in partnership with the MassHire Holyoke and MassHire Springfield career centers.

The program focused on much more than just English language skills, however. Students received lessons in computer literacy at the Gill Technology Center on the first floor of PAFEC, and they received job search and resume development support from advisers at HCC and counselors at the MassHire career centers.

Community integration and civic engagement was also part of the curriculum, Dunkelberg said. Guest lecturers included state Rep. Aaron Vega and

Holyoke mayor Alex Morse, who provided lessons on state and local government. Classes took field trips to the Holyoke Public Library, Nuestras Raices farm and Springfield museums.

The students came in with different levels of English language skills and they are heading in different directions, Dunkelberg said. Some have found jobs; others will continue to participate in HCC's regular, free ESOL classes; some, like Crespo Santos, have enrolled in one of HCC's workforce training programs. Many have expressed an interest in continuing their education as students at HCC.



State Rep. Aaron Vega was a guest lecturer at HCC's Puerto Rican new arrivals program.



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Maria Crespo Santos, of Chicopee, and Yamilette Gonzalez Caceres, of Springfield, recently completed HCC's Puerto Rican new arrivals program.