

Westfield State houses homeless HCC students

Holyoke Community College and Westfield State University will be partners in a state-sponsored pilot program that provides free campus housing and meal plans to students struggling with homelessness and food insecurity.

Westfield and HCC were the sixth college team chosen for the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education's Campus Housing Security pilot program, which matches a public university with a nearby community college to offer free room and board for up to five students.

Beginning with the spring 2020 semester, two first-year students from HCC, as well as a senior, junior and sophomore from Westfield State, have been living in a dormitory on the Westfield campus with full campus meal plans. The program also provides for free public transportation from Westfield to Holyoke, as well as case management services and other resources through the Shine Young Adult Housing Program in Springfield.

Although the arrangements have been complicated since the coronavirus outbreak, the governor's stay-at-home advisory and the transition to remote instruction at both colleges, the students remain housed on the Westfield campus.

The program started last year with the pairing of Bridgewater State University and Massasoit Community College; Framingham State University and MassBay Community College; Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College; and UMass-Lowell and Middlesex Community College.

This year two more college teams were added: Salem State University and North Shore Community College, and Westfield State and HCC.



Westfield State University President Ramon Torrecilha and Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal are pictured together in January 2019. *Submitted photo*

"An unfortunate byproduct of growing income inequality in Massachusetts is the rise of hunger and homelessness among our students," said Carlos E. Santiago, the state's commissioner of higher education. "I am thrilled to see the expansion of our pilot program to serve this vulnerable population and commend our campus leaders for committing resources to fund meal plans and offer academic supports that will increase the likelihood that these students succeed in earning college credentials."

The goal of the program is to help struggling students gain stability in their lives so they can complete their college degrees and make a successful transition

to permanent housing and meaningful careers.

"A lot of people are surprised to hear that housing insecurity and homelessness are a reality on many college campuses," said HCC President Christina Royal. "In order for our students to succeed academically, we must address some of the challenges they face with their basic needs. This partnership with Westfield will provide stability for these students so they can focus on their studies."

The state is providing \$48,000 per regional campus team to cover the cost for five beds in a university residence hall, with additional block grant funding from the Department of Higher

Education to cover any remaining housing costs.

Each participating institution covers the cost of its own students' meal plans, which for the two HCC students is being paid by the HCC Foundation, the college's nonprofit fundraising corporation. The five students will also continue to live on the Westfield campus during vacation breaks and summer months. To be eligible for the program, they must be enrolled full-time and be in good academic standing.

"We are proud to help address an increasing societal issue by assisting some students with housing and meals on campus through this thoughtful, state-initiated program," said Gloria Lopez, vice president for student affairs at Westfield State. "We are fortunate and pleased that we are able to accommodate these students, as we eagerly welcome them to our supportive learning environment and inclusive campus community."

According to the Department of Higher Education, Massachusetts is the first state to address these issues as a matter of intentional, state-level public policy, thanks to a unique partnership among the Department of Higher Education, Department of Housing and Community Development, and Executive Office of Health and Human Services. Through its Commission on Unaccompanied Homeless Youth, EOHHS is funding the annual stipends to cover the cost of dorm housing for up to five community college and state university students at six residential campuses.

A seventh pilot program, launched in fall 2019, provides off-campus, single-room occupancy for up to 11 homeless students attending public colleges and universities within the city of Boston.