



News Release

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Robust Washington County partnership creates job opportunities in healthcare

A county initiative allows Head Start parents chance to earn a PCC Patient Access Specialist certificate

PHOTO: https://www.pcc.edu/news/wp-content/uploads/sites/33/2021/02/Willow-Creek_9216-scaled.jpg

WASHINGTON COUNTY, Ore. – For many students, Portland Community College is a bridge to the middle class. Working closely with industry and social service partners, PCC provides education and training that helps people move from minimum wage jobs into living wage, family supporting careers.

In 2019, Community Action, which is a Washington County-based nonprofit, launched a pilot program called Whole Family Approach to support the parents and guardians of children enrolled in local Head Start programs with healthcare career training. Powered by a partnership between Community Action, PCC's Community Workforce Development and Institute for Health Professionals, the Department of Human Services, Worksystems and the Oregon Employment Department, Whole Family Approach helped a cohort of Head Start parents enter PCC's Patient Access Specialist Online Training Program during the 2019-20 academic year.

Patient access specialists are the frontline registration personnel that are often the first face a person sees when they enter a hospital, clinic, or specialized medical department. From signing in patients to completing insurance forms, a patient access specialist plays an important role in the business side of the hospital or clinic while also serving a key customer service function.

“These students were women, many of them single mothers, who had already faced many challenges in life,” said PCC Career Advisor Eduardo Garnica. “The majority had never taken online courses before.”

After dropping off children at Head Start, the cohort met at PCC's [Willow Creek Center](#) in Hillsboro. There they received crucial "on-ramp" services during the first term from PCC's Community Workforce Development team with support from staff at the Rock Creek Campus. These services included training on how to access and navigate the online learning platform, study skills, plus behavioral cognitive skills to foster long-term academic and professional success.

During the winter term of 2019-20, the cohort focused on completing the "Medical Terminology" course, continuing to meet at the Willow Creek Center so that a PCC staff person was on hand to answer questions and provide technical support as needed. The group was set to begin the Patient Access Specialist Program at Willow Creek in the spring of 2020, before PCC was forced to close its facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It took a lot of work to secure technology for the students and several were unable to complete the program due to childcare challenges or a need to provide greater support to their families," Garnica said. "Despite everything, however, nine students persevered and finished the program with the skills and certification necessary to start their healthcare career."

While each of the nine graduates earned their Certified Healthcare Access Associate (CHAA) certification, patient access manager for Kaiser Permanente and instructor Gloria Durant said the PCC program emphasized real-world skills and knowledge.

"We wanted them to get their certification, but also to learn what the expectations are and connect the dots between knowledge and what you do every day in the field," Durant said.

In the end, Durant said the graduates overcame their lack of medical experience and robust professional background with an inspired effort.

"They wanted it," she said. "They wanted to learn. They wanted to succeed. I had some that were dealing with some serious stuff at home and they kept pressing. They were diligent and never gave up. I'm proud of the work they did."

For more information on the Patient Access Specialist Program, visit <https://climb.pcc.edu/patient-access-specialist>

About Portland Community College: *Portland Community College is the largest post-secondary institution in Oregon and provides training, degree and certificate completion, and lifelong learning to more than 60,000 full- and part-time students in Multnomah, Washington, Yamhill, Clackamas, and Columbia counties. PCC has four comprehensive campuses, eight education centers or areas served, and approximately 200 community locations in the Portland metropolitan area. The PCC district encompasses a 1,500-square-mile area in northwest Oregon and offers two-year degrees, one-year certificate programs, short-term training, alternative education, pre-college courses and life-long learning.*

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