

Welcome Back Program Addresses Critical Nursing Shortage

A new bridge in Boston links hundreds of nurses to jobs that until recently were just beyond their reach. Like the renowned Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge, it begins in Charlestown, but this bridge is a human one. Educational case managers inside the Boston Welcome Back Center guide nurses from around the world through steps required to verify their education, prepare for mandatory exams and apply for a Massachusetts nursing license.

The new program, modeled after the highly successful San Francisco Welcome Back Center housed at San Francisco State University in cooperation with the City College of San Francisco, is especially timely as a solution to a growing problem—too few nurses. Based at Bunker Hill Community College with centers at Massachusetts Bay and Roxbury Community Colleges, the Boston Welcome Back Center was launched in October 2005 with a \$50,000 start-up grant from the Board of Higher Education's Nursing Initiative. This collaborative program was developed by the three community colleges, the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, with support from four hospitals, three industry boards, three high schools, the City of Boston, MGH Institute for Health Professions, Commonwealth Corporation (CommCorp), Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants and Massachusetts Board of Registration in Nursing.

"There is a critical shortage of nurses in this country, but especially in the Boston area," said Bunker Hill Community College President Mary L. Fifield. "Moreover, as the population of this region becomes more diverse, it is important to infuse the profession with people who reflect and understand different cultures. On a broader scale, the College has a commitment to new communities emerging within the metropolitan area. When we 'welcome back' individuals to the

nursing profession, the entire region benefits and becomes self-sustaining."

In its first five months, the Center served more than 220 women and men, ages 20 to 67, who come from 61 countries and five continents, and speak more than 40 languages. Welcome Back is a workforce development program, explained Executive Director Daniel Lam. Case managers work one-on-one with participants, helping them obtain original transcripts and documents from their native countries and prepare for National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN). Depending on their previous education, participants may need to study English or other subjects at BHCC or another college in order to obtain licensure.



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Before being approved by the Massachusetts Board of Registration for Nursing to take the NCLEX-RN exam, the nurses must submit an application to the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Programs (CGFNS) for an evaluation of credentials. Only then can they take the mandatory TOEFL test of English proficiency. Many also need to learn computer skills or the use of new technology, often while adapting to a new culture, juggling family responsibilities and working at one or more jobs.

Welcome Back Center services are provided free of charge. Participants are responsible for the cost of tuition and any agency fees related to licensure.

Information on alternative occupations is provided for those who may wish to refocus their skills for work in healthcare management, research, advocacy, or policy. Those interested in another health occupation or a bachelor's or master's degree may enroll in programs at one of the community colleges or at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

When she moved here from China six years ago, Michelle Li found that everything felt new. "I had nine years of experience as a cardiology nurse and was newly married to my American-born husband but I was unable to speak English. After I took English as a Second Language courses at Bunker Hill for a full year, I got a job as a medical secretary in the pediatric asthma center at New England Medical Center. I like being with the children but by resuming my nursing career, I can use my skills to help people more."

On her own, Li tried to get information on where to begin, but the more people she asked, the more confused she became. "That's why it's good to have help from the Welcome Back Center," she said. "I couldn't prepare for the exams and get my credentials without them because I don't know the ropes here."

The Center's Dan Lam and case managers Alison Cohn and Margaret Day know the requirements and appreciate the difficulties people face while learning their way in a new country and simultaneously dealing with regulatory agencies both here and abroad.

"Almost without exception, Welcome Back Center participants are underemployed, struggling to pay bills, supporting their families," said Lam. "They take jobs beneath their level of training just to survive. All of

them are immigrants, some are refugees seeking political asylum. Once they are employed, their status in this country changes but the obstacles are great."

Nkerakutabara Rukubanuka was employed as a hospital general nurse before leaving the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) in 2001 during that country's civil war. He speaks six languages and earned both a diploma and bachelor's degree in nursing before immigrating first to Germany, then to Massachusetts. While preparing for the TOEFL exam, he works weekends in Boston as a parking garage attendant.

"I applied to 30 hospitals in this country and they all turned me down because I didn't have a nursing license," said Rukubanuka. "I didn't even know what a license was." After two years of English courses at BHCC, he trained to qualify as a medical assistant then found work as a personal care attendant, a phlebotomist and a Certified Nursing Assistant. When he becomes licensed, he wants to work in geriatric nursing.

In Brazil, Laurinda Greene was a family law attorney and professor of nursing for 25 years. She moved to the United States with her husband and teenage son in 2000. Although she has enjoyed working as a volunteer in the patient education department at an area hospital, she wants to resume her career as an obstetrical nurse. Like the others, Greene, had found the route difficult. Until now.

"The people at the Welcome Back Center give you all the information you need," said Greene. "They share their experiences, improve our English and motivate us to become nurses here."

