

JVS program offers pathways to jobs, college, solid careers

A bridge to a career

Adam Smith Wednesday, April 20, 2016



HELPING HAND: JVS Bridges to College student Hanan Neamah, left, gets mentoring from instructor Leslie Reinherz, as she learns the skills to enter Bunker Hill Community College. Iraqi native Neamah emigrated to the U.S. as a refugee in 2014.

When Hanan Neamah was 12, her life unraveled.

The U.S. had just invaded her native Iraq, and her family fled in 2003. During the next decade, she would try to start her life over in several countries — Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan — and bear the loss of her father and grandfather.

“It was very tough for me,” said Neamah, now 24 and a resident of Quincy.

Finally, in 2014, she was able to enter the U.S. as a refugee with her mother, sister and brother.

But she had all but lost 10 years of her life — unable to complete high school or college because she had no place to call home during her teens and early 20s. Neamah also entered the U.S. with no command of the English language.

“When I left Iraq, I loved my school and I was a very motivated student,” she said, but after leaving the country, “I was facing an unknown future.”

It wasn't until she discovered the nonprofit Jewish Vocational Service, or JVS, in Boston that she found hope and help. Neamah enrolled in the group's high school diploma course and its Bridges to College program, a tuition-free initiative to help adults — mostly immigrants and the poor — learn the skills needed to enter community college, and then further their education or find a job.

Now in its seventh year, JVS's Bridges program is set to expand thanks to a three-year grant that will total more than a half-million dollars. In addition to the current two educational pathways — biotechnology and general studies — offered in the program, a third, Computer Science and Information Technology, will launch next year.

Though still being developed, the IT track will be modeled after JVS's biotechnology pathway that teams with Quincy College and allows students to earn an associate degree and technical certificate, said Kira Khazatsky, vice president of JVS.

"What kept coming up again and again from employers is that there is a huge shortage (of employees) for IT jobs that need more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree," said Khazatsky, explaining that before setting out to expand Bridges, JVS determined there was a need for skilled workers in the region's IT and computer science sectors.

The group expects students will be able to land entry-level IT jobs paying upward of \$35,000 a year, and soon advance to higher paying gigs, such as database administrators or network support specialist careers whose salaries start at about \$47,000 a year.

"An example is the health care sector's need for electronic record keeping," said Khazatsky.

Just like the current two tracks, the IT program will start with a 23-week course organized by JVS that gets students up to speed in math and English and other subjects needed to enroll in the community colleges. As long as the students meet the application requirements and commit to 25 hours a week, they can register in the free program that costs JVS about \$7,500 to \$10,000 per person. After that, they register in either a 9-month biotechnology certificate program at Quincy College or a general studies associate degree or certificate program at another college, typically Bunker Hill Community College, a JVS partner.

Often, the students start their college with six credits earned in the Pathways program, and JVS works with the students throughout their educational pursuits, said Lori DeBiasi, director of Bridges to College. JVS helps the students, many of them in their 30s to 50s, search for a job long before graduation, practice mock interviews, write their resumes and spot opportunities in their new field.

"It provides the ongoing supports ... to succeed both in college and a career," said DeBiasi.

Much of the IT program will be funded by \$675,000 partial federal grant administered by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation of Boston.

The Bridges program has already helped hundreds of students, many of whom are immigrants from Latin America, the Middle East, China, Africa and Haiti, land skilled jobs, said Khazatsky.

Jihane Berkhane, who came to the U.S. from Algeria, is one such student. Berkhane, who was at one time so discouraged with her career prospects that she thought about returning to her home country, is now a full-time manufacturing technician at Mass Biologics, getting paid \$17.75 an hour with benefits.

"They helped me to get a job, they worked with me on my resume ... on how to apply and how to mock interview," said Berkhane, who said she found a job "very quickly" after completing the certificate program at Quincy College last year.

Neamah, the refugee from Iraq, is now preparing to complete the 23-week JVS program and start taking courses in business management at Bunker Hill in September.

"JVS helped me to rebuild my life. ... Without it, I don't think I would even have known what type of future to write."