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Health care career training expands in Grants Pass at new RCC facility



JULIE ANDERSON / Daily Courier
From left, Trudy Hogg, a Rogue Community College dental hygiene faculty member, and students Dannie Lee, Monica Luengas, Zoey Corder and Leslie Weaver use peaches to practice giving dental shots during a Tuesday open house at RCC in Grants Pass. A $3.95 million project has transformed the E Building on campus into a state-of-the-art health care training hub.

By Vickie Aldous of the Daily Courier

Josephine County students will no longer have to trek over to Jackson County to pursue careers in several health care fields thanks to the opening of a newly renovated building at Rogue Community College's Redwood Campus in Grants Pass.

A $3.95 million project has transformed the E Building into a state-of-the-art training hub. With light pouring in through banks of large windows, the classrooms look like modern hospital rooms or dental offices.

RCC faculty, students and community members celebrated the completion of the renovation project with an open house on Tuesday.

Student and Grants Pass resident Dannie Lee is wrapping up a one-year dental assisting program. She said she struggled to work night shifts, attend classes and commute to RCC's Table Rock Campus in White City.

Lee said RCC's decision to start offering several health care programs in Grants Pass will save future students that hardship.

"I think it's awesome," she said, noting she spent a lot of money on gas.

In addition to dental assisting, RCC will have medical assisting, nursing assisting and phlebotomy programs at its Grants Pass campus starting this fall.

Previously, most health care programs were at the White City campus, with limited courses in temporary Redwood Campus spaces in Grants Pass, according to RCC.

Lee said she bonded with the other students going through the dental assisting program, and she believes future students will have the same experience in Grants Pass because of RCC's relatively small cohort groups.

"I think the students will experience the same thing here. They'll make lifelong friends in the dental field," she said.

Jennifer Godfrey, a Grants Pass resident and mother to a 4-year-old son, also endured the one-year commute to White City, spending about $150 per month on gas.

With her dental assisting certificate nearly in hand, she expects to make about $24 to $27 per hour.

Godfrey said she was a stay-at-home mom, but is now ready to re-enter the workforce — without having to settle for a minimum wage job.

David Koehler, vice president of student learning and success, said it's not realistic to expect students to travel long distances while handling other life responsibilities.

"It's really difficult for people to come from Cave Junction and to go all the way to White City," he said.

Providing more classes at the Grants Pass location will open up more opportunities for students — including those still in high school who can take RCC classes, he said.

Koehler said the Grants Pass School District and Three Rivers School District already have partnerships with RCC for their students to take community college classes.

He noted the various health care certificates available through RCC are "stackable," meaning a worker with one certificate can earn another in the future, adding to the person's professional skills and earning power.

The renovation and expansion of health care education was made possible by $3.6 million in federal funding secured with the help of U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden, according to RCC.

Neither of the Democratic senators were present Tuesday, but they sent words of congratulations about the project, with promises to continue fighting for federal funding to support workforce training. Wyden got a tour last week and Merkley sent a representative to the Tuesday open house.

Terry Hopkins, president of the Grants Pass & Josephine County Chamber of Commerce, was on hand to celebrate the opening of the renovated E Building with other chamber members. He praised RCC for its ongoing partnerships with businesses and desire to offer programs that benefit students and the economy.

"Your investment in our workforce, our community and the next generation is truly inspiring," Hopkins told RCC representatives.

Touring the building wasn't for the faint-of-heart or people who get queasy in hospitals.

In a large room that looked like a dental office, Trudy Hogg, a member of the dental hygiene faculty, and several students used peaches to practice giving shots to numb a patient's mouth. They demonstrated how to take apart the permanent metal parts of the syringe and place the disposable parts in a sharps container.

Another room contained dummy arms with realistic veins for students to practice drawing vials of blood or inserting intravenous lines.

Standing next to the disembodied arms in the light-filled room, Chauncie Barlow, RCC's Allied Health Program Coordinator, said she remembers taking anatomy and chemistry in the E Building when she was a student.

Built in 1981, the building received a complete overhaul this year, including new electrical, plumbing, heating, air conditioning and mechanical systems, as well as upgrades like a new sidewalk and wheelchair-accessible ramp, according to RCC.

Barlow said the building was gloomy, and students and instructors in one class were able to hear what was going on in another.

"It was just a dark cave," she said.