



City revives funding for program to train medical billers

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With a renewed commitment from the city, **LaGuardia Community College** recently graduated the fifth class of its medical billing training program and added Mount Sinai Health System as an employer partner.

The program, which started in 2016 with the help of the Harvard Business School Club of New York and Weill Cornell Medicine, has now graduated 113 people. The five-month program trains participants to work as medical billers for health systems and physicians' offices. The program is customized to meet medical employers' needs, teaching students common CPT codes and the way to fill out claims forms as well as health policy and business communication.

LaGuardia received a \$365,000 grant from the city Department of Small Business Services to offer the certificate program tuition-free. The funding allowed LaGuardia to resume the program 18 months after the fourth cohort graduated.

For the fifth cohort, 1,500 people applied, 27 were accepted, and 24 graduated in January. In the most recent class, 86% got jobs in accounting or revenue cycle-related positions upon graduation, including 13 at Weill Cornell, four at Mount Sinai and three at a private practice. Other providers to have hired from the program include Northwell Health, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center and CityMD. The typical salary range upon graduation is \$35,000 to \$45,000.

In joining Weill Cornell as an employer partner, Mount Sinai helps screen applicants, provides input on the curriculum, offers shadowing opportunities and interviews candidates for jobs. Richard Nagengast, vice president of revenue cycle at Mount Sinai Doctors Faculty Practice, said the graduates it has hired from LaGuardia have been well prepared.

"They're studying a program that's customized to the work we do," he said. "What's appealing about the program is we get people not just graduating from

college, but people with a wide range of experience that helps in problem-solving."

Deborah DiGioia, a 54-year-old from Middle Village in Queens, graduated from the program in January and is now doing medical billing for a holistic medicine physician in Manhattan. DiGioia had worked as a bookkeeper for a Queens plywood company that closed in 2009 and struggled to find a similar position before taking a job as a cashier at Sears. The retailer closed the Rego Park store where DiGioia worked in April 2017 but not before the long hours involved in liquidation led her to need carpal tunnel surgery, she said. Her occupational therapist referred her to the LaGuardia program.

"I decided I couldn't go back into retail," DiGioia said. "I'm getting older and it's a little too physical of a job for me. I wanted to work in an office."

In the program DiGioia found she favored customer-service roles. She's working part-time but the physician she works for recently approved her request for additional hours. Her 29-year-old daughter was accepted to start LaGuardia's medical billing program in April.

The city's health care industry has been a steady source of jobs, according to state Department of Labor data. Private-sector health employers in the city added 43,600 jobs in the 12 months through February, a growth rate of 5.9%. New jobs have been particularly prevalent in ambulatory health care, which had 9% more jobs in February than in the previous year. The record number of private-sector jobs statewide has challenged all employers looking for entry-level talent, said Elena Volovelsky, a labor market analyst at the state Department of Labor. Unlike some other industries, such as retail, health care is more resistant to economic downswings.

"It could be a way to transition from one field to another," Volovelsky said of the certificate program.

—Jonathan LaMantia