

Recovery's recruits

■ **Addiction counseling classes at SCCC in demand**

■ **3-year federal grant will cover 85% of student costs**

BY CANDICE FERRETTE
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Twenty-six students sat in a circle inside a Suffolk County Community College classroom last month, debating the proper use of the words "victim" and "survivor" when referring a recovering drug addict.

A lively back-and-forth ensued — with one student saying, "That was me" — until the instructor, Kathleen Ayers-Lanzillotta, stepped in.

"The passion you guys have for this is so real, and your own personal experiences will come up, but you need to keep that in check so you can help get someone else on the road to addiction recovery," she said.

It was an essential reminder for the students, in training to be licensed addiction counselors who will work in treatment clinics and other community settings to confront the drug epidemic in Suffolk.

Demand for the program was so high this semester that it was the only one in New York to receive a federal grant to expand enrollment and help place students in jobs. The funding is from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"This grant comes to us at a time when we've seen a record number of heroin deaths on Long Island, and drug abuse, sadly, continues to rise," SCCC president Shaun L. McKay said.

Adding enrollment

The three-year award of \$847,059 will support 85 percent of student tuition, fees and supplies for those working toward the certificate in chemical dependency counseling. Enrollment will rise about 70 percent to 120 students annually, said Ayers-Lanzillotta, program coordinator and SCCC assistant professor.

State officials said there is a need for more counselors trained to address the rising drug addiction problem. There are approximately 7,000 cre-



SCCC students take part in a role-playing exercise as part of training to be addiction counselors.

dential alcoholism and substance abuse counselors, also known as CASACs, in New York State; more than 900 of them reside on Long Island, according to the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, or OASAS.

SCCC is one of 51 academic institutions the state has approved to offer CASAC education and training. "Professional opportunities in this rewarding field are expected to grow over the next five years and beyond," an OASAS spokeswoman said.

The certificate at SCCC is earned in conjunction with an associate degree or can be obtained after a student has a bachelor's or master's degree, often in the mental health field.

The program is increasingly attracting students who see the destructive force of addiction in their own communities. Years ago, 90 to 95 percent of the people who were providing chemical dependency counseling were themselves in recovery, said Ayers-Lanzillotta, who has spent more than three decades working in the field.

"Today, it is a whole differ-

ent ball of wax," she said. "I just interviewed a young man — 19 years old — for the program who has never lived with addiction at home, but sees what it is doing to his friends and wants to know how to help."

Adolescent drug abuse

Among the reasons SCCC secured the grant was to train more counselors to work with the adolescent population on the Island, where seventh- and eighth-graders are reporting that their first drug use was at age 11, according to a regional survey.

One in five Suffolk County teens report abusing prescription pain medications, prescription stimulants and/or tranquilizers, according to the 2010-2011 Long Island Regional Youth Development Survey.

Johanna Ramos, 38, a mother of three from Nesconset, said she is hoping to earn her degree by the spring so she can work at a nonprofit as an addiction counselor or prevention educator. She would like to pursue a bachelor's degree — and possibly a master's — in social work.

During her eldest daughter's

senior year in the Smithtown district, there were several heroin deaths, Ramos said.

"I can't just sit here and watch all of these young children go like this," she said.

Another student, Debbie Wolff, said she hopes to "pay it forward" after she completes her training as a counselor.

Wolff, 42, commutes nearly two hours from her East Hampton home to attend the counseling class on the Brentwood campus each week.

She said she had been addicted to alcohol for decades before her last drink in April 2011.

After a 2008 arrest for driving while intoxicated, she lost custody of her children, attended 25 different rehabilitation programs and was sentenced to jail.

The community rallied behind her during her recovery, Wolff said, and she wants to prove herself worthy of their confidence.

"I've learned to be a person, and it was only because I had people who believed in me and finally got the support I needed," she said. "Hopefully, that's what I can help do for someone else."

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CORRECTIONS

State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli is single and has no children. An item in yesterday's Voters Guide was incorrect.

East Hampton Town Councilwoman Kathee Burke-Gonzalez's title was incorrect in a photo caption yesterday.

THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1957 The Soviet Union launched Sputnik 2, the second man-made satellite, into orbit; on board was a dog named Laika who was sacrificed in the experiment.
1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson soundly defeated Republican Barry Goldwater to win a White House term in his own right.