LIFEPATH gets new lifeblood thanks to two federal grants

JOHNSON CITY – Two significant federal grants recently were awarded to LIFEPATH, the Tennessee Public Health Training Center that is operated by East Tennessee State University’s College of Public Health.

The funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) will help continue the statewide work being done by the center.

“Without this money, LIFEPATH would be gone,” said Paula Masters, director of the center and assistant dean for student services in the College of Public Health. “Originally, we had a five-year grant for this center, but funding for all public health training centers ended early because of federal budget cuts.”

LIFEPATH began in 2011 as a facility to help those working in public health fields continue to receive training and education. In addition to emphasizing non-academic workforce training, the program featured degree-completion training to encourage those already in public health careers to pursue further education.

Several dozen public health professionals have utilized LIFEPATH in receiving diplomas or certificates in graduate programs from ETSU. LIFEPATH has also provided 150 statewide training sessions to more than 15,000 workers.

Masters spent the last fiscal year keeping LIFEPATH open on a minimal budget.

“Public health training centers at the federal level were cut by 86 percent. So you have to figure out how in the world you do everything you were doing with just 14 percent of your budget,” she said. “After we had worked so hard to create such a wonderful program, I was so worried about what was going to happen to help the workforce.”

Then, in September, when LIFEPATH was looking like it might come to an abrupt end, the program got a major boost through the two HRSA grants.

The first grant, the Tennessee Public Health Traineeship Program, is for $150,000 annually for three years. It will provide financial support to recruit and retain students in the public health shortage areas of environmental health, biostatistics and epidemiology.

“Eighty percent of that funding is direct money to be awarded to people to complete their degrees,” Masters explained. “It is money to recruit and educate at the graduate level in those shortage areas.”

It will also support student field placements at practice sites in Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina.

The second grant is a sub-award from the Region IV Public Health Training Center to provide training to current and future public health workers in Tennessee, focusing on health professionals working in governmental organizations in medically underserved areas.
“We’re always committed to meeting the needs of people living and working in underserved areas, and this grant helps us do that,” Masters said. “It provides that crucial support for the workforce that focuses every day on the health of Tennessee residents.”

Dr. Randy Wykoff, dean of the College of Public Health, said keeping LIFEPATH alive benefits the people of Tennessee, the public health professionals of Tennessee and public health students everywhere.

“The College of Public Health has a long-standing commitment to providing world-class training to working professionals,” he said. “LIFEPATH has been at the forefront of this effort. These grants will allow us to continue to execute this mission, while, at the same time, attracting new students to our key shortage areas.”

For more information about LIFEPATH, call Masters at 423-439-4421.

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