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Cuts Threaten Studies Program for Poor

By Jenna Russell-GLOBE STAFF

A single mother from Dorchester, Powell started classes Thursday night at the college. She plans to major in women's studies and Africana studies and dreams of becoming a professor. And she says she would not be going to college at all if she had not first spent a year studying philosophy, history, and literature at the Codman Square Health Center.

Dozens of disadvantaged Boston residents have read Shakespeare and Socrates -- and found their way to college -- in the four years since the Dorchester health center started hosting the **Clemente Course**, an intensive, one-year humanities curriculum offered free to poor people in 50 locations around the world. But no new students will start classes this fall in Boston or Worcester, where the program also has a four-year history.



Facing a \$250,000 budget shortfall caused, in large part, by a recent tightening of state rules for uninsured healthcare reimbursement, the Dorchester health center will shelve the course this year to help balance its budget. Bill Walczak, the health center's CEO, described the decision as painful, and said his staff will seek new funding to allow the course to be restored next year.

Efforts to find a new host site for the Clemente Course in Worcester, where funding was also a problem, have been unsuccessful, said David Tebaldi, executive director of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, which pays the salaries of the college professors who teach the course.

The course will be offered at two surviving locations this fall: in Holyoke, where the program is seven years old, and at a new site in New Bedford, where the University of Massachusetts at

Dartmouth will pay professors. Students, who meet two nights a week from October to May, must be 17 and able to read a newspaper in English, and their households must be "low income" under federal guidelines. Students who finish earn credits from **Bard College** in New York City, which may be transferred to other schools.

Local social service agencies that host the program spend \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year to remove the barriers that could stop students from finishing, by providing transportation, books, and child care, Tebaldi said.

"It's not much money, but [the course] is not the core mission of these agencies, so when the crunch comes, they have to focus on their core mission," he said.

Named for the first agency to host the course, the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in New York, the Clemente Course was created a decade ago by writer and journalist Earl Shorris. It began as an experiment, Shorris said, grounded in his belief that job training perpetuates poverty, while education in the humanities, typically off-limits to poor people, offers new ways of thinking that can take their lives in new directions.

One of the students in the first course, a homeless man with dyslexia, now has a doctorate degree in philosophy, said Shorris. Another has a doctorate in English. Two are dentists. The course has spread through the United States and to other countries; it is offered in Los Angeles and in tiny Alaskan villages.

Shorris said in an interview he was deeply disturbed by the program's interruption in Boston. He blamed Governor Mitt Romney for the changes in state healthcare policy that have hit the Codman Square Health Center.

"It's not moral to make those kinds of cuts in social service funding," said Shorris. "It's simply the wrong thing to do."

Romney's communications director, Eric Fehrstrom, referred questions about the new rules to the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, where staff did not immediately provide answers.

In Massachusetts, 150 people have completed the course since it was first offered in Holyoke. Many have gone on to college, though the foundation is just beginning to track students, and no one knows how many have finished. There are other, more subtle benefits, Tebaldi said, like the confidence gained by many students.

"They might be more likely to go talk to their child's teacher, where before they felt inadequate," he said. "Their children are also transformed. When your mother's sitting at the kitchen table reading Plato, it sends a powerful message."

Devonya Havis, a lecturer in philosophy at Harvard University and Boston College who taught in the Clemente Course last year, said the students "think deeply, because their life experience has brought them to think deeply."

Powell said the idea of studying the humanities seemed overwhelming at first. "I thought it was too late, impossible, unless I hit the lottery and could go to school full time," she said. On class days, she rushed home from work, walked her dog, and took two buses to the health center.

There, "it just felt right, being in the classroom," she said. She completed the course in May 2004, and was accepted this year into a program for older students at Simmons.

A "bridge course" that helps Clemente alumni move to college will continue at the Codman Square center this year, and the search for new funding is already ramping up.

"We won't let it go, because it works," said Shorris.