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Johnstown native selected to help launch health program

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— A Johnstown native and Windber Research Institute expert has been selected to help bring health care reform to those it was designed to help.

Charvonne Holliday is one of 33 graduate students named to the Jonas Salk Fellowship project, sponsored by the Jewish Healthcare Foundation and Health Careers Futures.

Holliday is completing her Ph.D. in public health at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health, Behavioral and Community Health Sciences Department.

She says the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is an important development in the field of public health.

“It is really a revolutionary change and I just want to be part of it,” Holliday said.

The fellowship team meets six times through the course of the project, which wraps up in March. Each meeting features guest speakers and information about health care reform and its implementation process. Team members brainstorm about how to best reach eligible individuals and help them enroll in the new Health Insurance Marketplace. The first session was held earlier this month.

“Two of the organizations we hear from are going into libraries to sign people up for the Health Insurance Marketplace,” Holliday said, noting that low-income workers may not have Internet access in their homes.

Literacy, computer skills and lack of education can all be barriers to receiving the subsidized health insurance, she said.

As the project continues, team members expect to work with community organizations in the Pittsburgh area to find innovative ways to reach eligible families, Holliday said.

At the end of the project, participants will present the results of their enrollment programs and lessons learned during the project.

One of the challenges will be overcoming misinformation and misunderstandings about the

insurance marketplace and Obamacare in general, she said.

Although many people think the insurance marketplaces are for the poor and unemployed, Holliday said, the truth is that many people working several part-time jobs or working full-time for nonprofit organizations will benefit from the marketplace.

Those selected for the Salk Fellowships include graduate students in a broad range of health-related fields, Holliday said.

“It is a really good opportunity to work with such a diverse group of professionals,”

Holliday sees the project as an extension of her position as coordinator of international projects for the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at Windber Research Institute.

“We pride ourselves on being a translational research organization,” Holliday said, referring to the commitment to take advances from the research lab and apply them to patient care.

By combining its molecular cancer research with public health and clinical applications in a holistic approach to medicine, Windber is poised to be part of health care reform, she said.

“People will have access to preventive care, and that ties back into public health,” Holliday said.

Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Director Dr. Matthew Masiello said Holliday's selection for the Salk Fellowship reflects well on the institute. He credited the institute CEO Tom Kurtz and its board for allowing her to participate.

“The big picture is that the soon-to-be Dr. Holliday is a remarkable young woman,” Masiello said.

Holliday also is leading two projects through Windber. One is a partnership with one of the largest health organizations in Europe, working to improve the prognosis and lifestyles of children with asthma. The other is an anti-bullying project with the World Health Organization.

Kurtz echoed Masiello's compliments.

“The award appropriately reflects the endless hours Char has spent in her education and career,” Kurtz said. “She demonstrates the meaning of teamwork, flexibility, dependability, professionalism and loyalty.

“Char will have the opportunity to help reshape the way health care is delivered in this country.”

Masiello said Holliday is a testament to Windber Research Institute's work with local colleges and schools to encourage students to pursue science education and research.

“What we try to do is bring in and mentor the skills of the finest of our local scholars,” he said.