

Career Ignite graduates first class

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HOLLY HILL — Janely Rodriguez remembers running to the CareerSource office to sign up for what she thought was a potential life-changer.

"I did everything I had to do because I wanted this," Rodriguez said in front of her two sons, her fellow Career Ignite graduates and the crowd of people attending her graduation that was held Thursday afternoon in a courtyard along Riverside Drive.

"At 46, I'm so proud of myself! I know there will be open doors right away," she said as raised her certificate above her head.

Rodriguez was part of the first class that enrolled in Career Ignite, which trains people in the field of medical coding. It is a 16-week, 256-hour classroom-based training program that was founded by CareerSource Flagler Volusia and Synergy Billing, a local medical billing coding company that specializes in serving community health centers. The next class starts in September.

"It was like a full-time job," said Rodriguez of the program. "It was very intense, but it was well worth it."

Fourteen students enrolled in the class and 13 of them graduated. Ten attended Thursday's graduation and some had tears in their eyes. All of them had spent years unemployed or "underemployed" based on their past work experiences, said Jeannette Duerr, a Synergy spokeswoman.

The average starting salary in the field of medical coding and billing is \$36,000 and the percentage of certified professional coders who are out of work is less than 2 percent nationwide, said Duerr.

"There is a need out there for this," said Cheryl Reed, 57, one of the 10 graduates of the program who previously worked as a receptionist in a medical office.

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The next step for the graduates is to take a Certified Professional Coders examination, which will be a 5-hour test with 150 questions. One must score a 70 percent or higher to pass.

Rodriguez had been in the medical billing industry before, but her employer of eight years was bought out by a national company and after executives discovered she had no high school diploma, they cut her loose during its first wave of layoffs.

Rodriguez worked at a fast-food restaurant while earning her General Educational Development diploma and then later her associate's degree. She completed all of it in addition to her Career Ignite classes.

"God, I've been in school for a while," she said.

Rodriguez's husband wasn't able to join her and her sons Thursday. He was working his second job, she said.