TIMES UNION

Hotel Redesigned for the Homeless Will Open in Ulster County

Willow Landing is a former Quality Inn that has been heavily upgraded into a modern living complex. It could house more than 100 people.

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Willow Landing, a former Quality Inn, has been redesigned into a modern supportive living complex and will include a saltwater pool, playgrounds, a basketball court, and three grand atriums. Workers were planting shrubs and doing landscaping during a visit to the site in the town of Ulster on Oct. 2. Roger Hannigan Gilson/Times Union

ULSTER — An 83-unit apartment complex could take a large bite out of Ulster County's homelessness problem when it opens in December.

The complex, Willow Landing, is a former Quality Inn that has been heavily upgraded into a modern living complex and will include a saltwater pool, playgrounds, a basketball court, and three grand atriums. Located just outside Kingston, Willow Landing will house

at-risk populations and includes two- and three-bedroom apartments for families, meaning well over 100 people could live there.

There are a significant number of people without homes in Ulster County. During the last point-in-time count — a mandated survey in which volunteers and others count people in emergency or transitional housing, or those sleeping on the streets or in their cars, on a day in late January — 566 people were experiencing homelessness, including 45 who were unsheltered. That is one out of every 324 people in the county.

The Ulster County Department of Social Services houses most of these people in privately owned motels. Conditions are less than ideal: a county inspection last September at one, the Kingston Motel, found dozens of violations, including cockroach and bedbug infestations, mold, broken smoke detectors, unfinished ceiling patches, and missing flooring in dozens of rooms.

Families are also housed at the motels. Due to limited affordable housing options, the average family stays in these motels for more than three years.

RUPCO, a nonprofit that provides housing throughout the Hudson Valley, is developing Willow Landing. Vice President of Social and Human Services Emma Hambright said she was most excited for families "to be able to be steadily housed," and for children living there to be able to invite their friends over and play in the playgrounds.

"I would love to see them relax and have fun, and be kids," she said.

She added that RUPCO was "working with (the Department of Social Services) to get these folks out of motels."

Willow Landing will be permanent supportive housing, and applicants must fall under one of seven categories to live there: They must be chronically homeless; have a substance abuse disorder, HIV, or a serious mental illness; or be a veteran, a survivor of domestic violence, or between 18 and 25. Applicants must also make less than 50% of the area median income, or less than $58,650 for a family of four.

Most people experiencing homelessness in the county fall under one of these categories, Hambright said.

"There's no shortage of applications, unfortunately," she said.

RUPCO relies on referrals from other organizations in the county, such as Family of Woodstock, and has received about 400 applications for the 83 rooms.

The "supportive" in "permanent supportive housing" refers to an array of programming offered at Willow Landing. The complex will have case managers and front desk staff, as well as two drivers who will drive local routes, Hambright said. The YWCA will open a daycare in the complex with slots for tenants, and the saltwater pool will have two lifeguards. Willow Landing also wants to hold therapeutic classes, including a women's group, a reading class, and sound baths.

The very structure was designed to be therapeutic. On a tour of the complex Oct. 2, Sally Dolan, RUPCO's associate project manager for construction services, said the

building was redeveloped using “trauma-informed principles.” The designers avoided fiery colors in favor of calming hues; broke up the long hallways with large, sun-filled atriums that serve as social spaces and include desks for counselors; and altered the straight lines of the former hotel’s exterior so they undulate. The building looks more like contemporary, urban housing than the hotel it once was.

Pets are allowed in the building, Dolan said, an important point, as some people with dogs experiencing homelessness would rather sleep on the street than give up their pup to stay in a shelter. The building has a dog run in its acres of landscaped outdoor space.

Laura Nordstrom, the county’s director of housing and homelessness, called Willow Run “a beautiful new complex that we are really excited about.”

“It is significantly better than the hotels/motels because it is permanent supportive affordable housing,” she wrote in an email. “The living quarters, unlike hotel/motel rooms, are fully equipped apartments designed for long-term habitation, and (have) the appropriate infrastructure for people to reside there at all times.”

The Department of Social Services provides services to residents at the Kingston Motel, which they will continue to receive at Willow Landing, but the new complex includes “some incredible amenities,” Nordstrom added.

Willow Landing also has a commercial aspect: a commissary kitchen where chefs can prep and store food. The building will include a free fridge for tenants filled by the eateries.

RUPCO wants to open the building to tenants Dec. 1.

“We’re trying to get folks housed before the holidays,” Hambright said.