

# 'Wellness Hub' Would Divert Those in Crisis from Courts, 'Motel System,' ER

Plan would change how Columbia County helps those facing mental health or substance use crises

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The Joslen Motor Lodge outside Hudson in Greenport, one of the privately owned motels currently used by Columbia County to house its homeless population. The proposed Wellness Hub would house many of those currently in the "motel system."

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**GREENPORT** — For the past two years, elected officials, police, social workers and mental health professionals in Columbia County have been meeting to hash out a plan that could change the way homelessness, drug addiction and mental illness are treated in the area.

They are focused on plans to build The Wellness Hub, which backers say would address persistent problems faced by the city of Hudson and the wider county while genuinely helping those going through crises, as well as taking pressure off local police and the emergency room and saving the county money.

The plan is the direct outgrowth of a 2021 report commissioned by Hudson Mayor Kamal Johnson to reform the criminal justice system in the wake of calls for racial and social justice after George Floyd's 2020 murder by police in Minnesota. Johnson was seeking reforms "intended to reduce policing of people in a mental health or substance use disorder (SUD) related crisis," according to the study, called the Sequential Intercept Model Report.

The hub would serve county residents in crisis by offering a range of resources, including a "safe haven"-style shelter, therapy, peer counseling and social services, steering them away from the court system and the emergency room. Residents could walk into the hub, located a little more than a mile from downtown Hudson in the town of Greenport, or be taken there by police after being picked up for petty crimes.

The major point of the hub is "to reduce arrests," according to Mayor Johnson.

Johnson said the hub would be a "one-stop shop" for residents seeking services — some of which are currently scattered around the county, some of which do not exist at all.

## **Homeless in a rural county**

Like many rural areas Upstate, Columbia County has homeless people, but no homeless shelter.

Instead, families and individuals without housing are put up in privately owned motels.

The "motel system" is far from ideal, according to Cheryl Roberts, the executive director of the Greenburger Center for Social & Criminal Justice, a major force in developing the hub.

Of the seven privately owned motels used to house people late last December (the last period with immediately available data from the county Department of Social Services), none were actually in Hudson, the epicenter of homelessness in the county. The least proximate motel was in Latham, nearly an hour's drive from the city. One motel was on the side of I-90, with a gas station and a truck stop the only places to get food within miles. Another, in Claverack, had no food options for miles.

Not only are there no places to get food within walking distance — most of the people housed in the motels do not have cars — but these individuals are also isolated from social connections and from the county services they need to get by, Roberts said.

Homeless people often also have substance use disorders and struggle with mental illness, and Roberts said the motels can cause them to "decompensate," or psychologically unravel, because the circumstances of the motel system "would drive anyone insane."

The motels are also not the nicest. One, the Joslen Motor Lodge in Greenport, has been the site of various criminal episodes since 2010, including incidents where people were slashed with knives, threatened with guns, and badly beaten. In 2016, a man was charged with concealing a human corpse after dumping the body of Halle Schmidt in a forest after she overdosed on heroin during a drug-fueled party at the motel.

The seven motels and a "civic motel" operated by a nonprofit housed 103 homeless people — including 25 children — on any given night last December, according to data from the county Department of Social Services.

"I think that everyone at this point is well aware that this is not the answer, this is not the solution, and we need something else, we need a plan B," Roberts said.

A “safe haven” shelter at the Wellness Hub would be far better for people experiencing homelessness or related problems, according to county Department of Social Services Commissioner Bob Gibson.

“You’re in a facility where you have oversight, where you can get assistance right away — our workers are close to you, and we contract with nonprofits to staff the shelter — so we provide wrap-around services, and if (the shelter) is on a campus where it’s one part of a Wellness Hub, most of the human services and social services you’re going to are contained within the campus,” he said.

The hub would also arguably save Columbia County money. Transporting people to out-of-the-way motels to house them at market rates is not cheap. Gibson said a motel room generally costs between \$95 and \$105 a night.

According to an analysis by Gibson in the 2021 mapping report, four high utilizers of the system cost the county a total of about \$120,000 in motel costs, as well as \$5,600 in transportation costs, annually.

## **“High Utilizers”**

Diverting residents with substance use disorders and mental health problems from the criminal justice system is the original point of the Wellness Hub. Among other things, this would reduce the amount of resources police expend on these issues, according to Mayor Johnson.

“We’re spending so much money on policing, as well as on motel rooms and different efforts, and a lot of it is not working,” Johnson said.

Congressman Marc Molinaro, a Republican whose district includes Columbia County, gave the Wellness Hub a major boost when he requested \$5 million in federal funding for the project from the annual appropriations bill. Funding will be decided next fall.

Molinaro requested the funds “because I believe it is the model that America has to replicate to confront the mental health crisis (facing) people in this country,” he said in an interview Tuesday.

When Molinaro was Dutchess County executive, he oversaw the creation of a similar hub, the Dutchess County Crisis Stabilization Center, which focuses on “crisis intervention and trauma-informed care,” Molinaro said.

During its first year, emergency rooms and police diverted people from the county jail to the stabilization thousands of times, according to Molinaro, “many of (whom) dealt with mental health issues and substance abuse disorders,” leading to a decrease in the jail’s population.

In February 2017, the month before the stabilization center opened, the Dutchess County Jail held an average of 409 people daily, according to the Dutchess County Criminal Justice Center. Two years later (and before bail reform was enacted), the jail had a daily average of 353 people, a decrease of about 14 percent.

The stabilization center is only the hub of a larger mental health care system in Dutchess County, Molinaro said. He noted that for Columbia County’s hub to work, police, paramedics, dispatchers and others would need to be trained in dealing with mental health crises.

The 2021 mapping report had a large focus on “high utilizers” of systems in the county: individuals, often who have mental health problems, substance abuse disorders, or both, who cycle in and out of the motel system, jail, and Columbia Memorial Health, the county’s hospital.

Hudson Police Chief Ed Moore said his officers receive about 8-10 calls for emotionally disturbed people a month in the city of 5,900, usually about the same few individuals.

Though that may not sound like a huge number, a single call can stress many resources, as police must spend time dealing with the person, who is then often taken by ambulance to Columbia Memorial Health, taking up the time of paramedics and emergency room staff, according to Moore.

The hospital's ER does about 30 mental health evaluations a week, according to CMH spokesman Bill Van Slyke, though not all of those are people in crisis. There are also about 250 visits to Columbia Memorial Health a year related to drugs, but for non-medical reasons, "such as the person who has become homeless or is in crisis related to the impact of substance use."

"The Wellness Hub could provide a non-medical alternative to many of these social determinants patients who have no viable alternative to the emergency department," Slyke added.

About a half-dozen high utilizers in Hudson, many of whom hang out at the Seventh Street Park, have been arrested for petty crimes more than 100 times, according to Moore, which doesn't include the hundreds of times police are called on their account and an arrest is not made.

Moore, who is a member of the group developing the Wellness Hub, said bail reform had exacerbated this problem, since police have to immediately release the petty offenders, "and the whole process begins anew," he said.

Moore said he was supportive of the Wellness Hub, but added it wasn't the complete answer.

It has not been determined if people who are homeless and picked up for petty crimes will be charged, then brought to the Wellness Hub, or will be brought to the hub without being charged, according to Moore, who said such a directive would have to be worked out with the local courts.

Molinaro's request for \$5 million would cover the cost of one of the three buildings in the hub. Members of the group developing the Wellness Hub said the other two buildings could be subsequently built by requesting state and federal money.