

Community Wellness Centers- The Gathering Place

Description

MHA was awarded the Community Wellness Center grants in fiscal year 2025 for two counties: Morris and Sussex. With the assistance of the staff and community, the centers have been named The Gathering Place and have been in operation since October 2024.

MHA's Community Wellness Centers are a peer-driven community-based resources that provide a safe and welcoming space where individuals can engage in a variety of therapeutic and recreational activities aimed at promoting mental, emotional and physical well-being. Services are designed to empower individuals, foster independence, and promote self-efficacy in an environment that encourages social connections and personal growth. Through workshops, group activities, and social events, the center encourages self-expression and skill-building all while supporting individuals in achieving their wellness goals. The programs elements include peer support/self-help activities, socialization, training/education, wellness and recovery activities, community outreach, and advocacy. It is through these elements that the Center aims to maximize members' independence, increase their quality of life, cultivate a community of recovery that cultivates development of health social support systems.

Personnel

Each location has a Program Director who provides oversight, support and supervision to the programs, when needed. The Community Wellness Centers are staffed by a Full-Time Wellness Manager at each site, who supervise the Part-Time Support Specialists, Bi-Lingual Support Specialists, and Community Resource Navigators. All staff members are lived experience professionals with personal experience living with mental health and/or substance use concerns.

Caseload

In this first partial year of operation, the Morris and Sussex Wellness Centers have engaged three hundred and forty-six (346) new individuals with lived experience in mental health and/or substance use. Of those 346 new members, they visited the wellness centers and impressive two thousand four hundred and eighteen (2418) times. Each center has a unique population its respective community.

Members of the center are adults 18 years old or older. They have a past history of mental health or substance use diagnoses and are at various levels of recovery. Each member at the Wellness Centers has their own unique story. It is our belief that the members will use their experience to help guide their peers in their own recovery. Some members are new to the mental health system but have lived with symptoms for most of their lives while other members are experiencing their symptoms for the first time.

Demographics

Of the 1003 walk-ins at the Wellness HUB, 85% treated identified as White/Caucasian, 8% Black/African American, 6% Asian, and 1% identified as “other”. Ethnicity breakdown included 88% non-Hispanic and 12% Hispanic/Latin (o)(a)(x), and of those identifying as Hispanic, 5 consumers were also only Spanish speaking. The Wellness HUB consumers identify as 47% Male, 50% Female, and 3% Gender Non-Conforming or transgender.

Of those served in FY 2025, 16% were 18-24 years old, 26% were in between 25 and 34, 38% between 35 and 54, and 20% were 55 years old and older. The outliers include 32 consumers 18 and 19 years old and 23 consumers were 75 years old or older. Our youngest consumer being 18 years old and oldest was 92 years old.

Performance Outcomes

The Community Wellness Centers participate in the agency-wide Quality Assurance (QA) program which conducts monthly meetings and collects data on the utilization, quality and effectiveness of services and treatment provided by each Mental Health Association program.

Community Wellness Center’s performance indicators measure overall consumer satisfaction, accessibility (centers being open during times convenient to the members), effectiveness (how many visits were made to the center), and efficiency (ease of accessing the center). During this fiscal year, 100% of members surveyed reported they were satisfied with the Community Wellness Centers. MHA was able to quickly open our centers which are available after typical business hours on Mondays, Wednesday and Saturdays to meet the needs of member. In our Morris and Sussex centers we saw members a total of 4,117 times since opening our doors.

Consumer Satisfaction Surveys

During this first year in operation, staff focused on getting new members to experience the centers. We have had weekly (or more frequent) community meetings which we are call ‘Community Empowerment Meetings’. During those meetings, which are member-run, all attendees are able to voice concerns in real-time. They are part of the planning process for new groups, trips and activities, as well as, engaging new members and overall, how to improve the centers.

In Fiscal Year 2025, 28 Community Wellness Center consumers were surveyed. As a result, 100% reported that they were satisfied with the CWC. 100% felt the peer providers were welcoming, friendly, and professional and 83% of consumers who attend the Community Wellness Center report that they attend more than once a week. In addition, 100% of members surveyed felt that they have been introduced to new friends while attending the centers.

Surveyors were given two open ended questions, how has the Gathering Place improved your life and additional comments, their answers included the following; ‘It keeps me going’, ‘it has made it easier to socialize with my condition’, ‘made me a stronger person’, and ‘this is a great place for mental health’.

Program Highlights

This fiscal year, The Gathering Place - Community Wellness Centers has made a profound impact as a safe and welcoming haven for adults facing mental health and substance use challenges. Officially opened in Newton and Parsippany, the Centers offers a vital lifeline by fostering healing, connection, and personal growth through peer-led groups, supportive services, and meaningful socialization opportunities. It stands as a beacon against loneliness and isolation by creating a respectful, stigma-free space where individuals feel accepted and empowered on their journeys to recovery and wellness.

Regular visits from partners such as Nourish, CHOICES, County College of Morris, and Sussex, Hope One, and other treatment/program providers have been instrumental in connecting clients to critical resources, education, and care.

Community Wellness Centers offered groups such as art therapy, depression and anxiety support groups, All Recovery meetings, mindfulness and meditation sessions, yoga and gentle movement classes, wellness, and nutrition workshops, coping skills and stress management groups, creative writing circles, and peer-led discussion groups on topics like self-esteem and healthy relationships. In addition, social activities such as game nights, music jams, and walking clubs foster inclusive networks where participants feel welcome, valued, and connected.

Community meals at the Center are about so much more than food, they are nourishment for both body and spirit. Sharing a meal creates a natural space for conversation, connection, and belonging. For many participants, these gatherings are a rare chance to sit at a table surrounded by friendly faces, to be welcomed without judgment, and to feel seen and valued. The simple act of eating together helps break down barriers, reduces isolation, and fosters a sense of dignity.

Adding to the experience, members have taken the initiative to grow their own fresh herbs right at the Center. These herbs — like basil, mint, parsley, and rosemary are picked straight from the garden and used to season and brighten the family dinners.

Through meal prep and gardening, participants do more than just cook; they connect, share stories, and build a sense of pride and belonging.

Since the Center's opening, we've had the privilege of welcoming patients from Greystone to participate in our "Cooking on a Budget" class, a practical and empowering program designed to help them prepare for independence and success after discharge.

At the Center, social activities are more than just fun outings, they are opportunities to build community, boost wellness, and create lasting memories. This year, members enjoyed special events such as attending a local baseball game, where the excitement of the crowd, the sounds of the ballpark, and the

shared experience of cheering together brought a sense of joy and camaraderie. They also gathered for a community picnic, complete with good food, laughter, and fellowship. These activities give participants a chance to step away from daily challenges, connect with peers, and experience the simple pleasures of friendship and shared traditions.

Advocacy Activities

Core advocacy activities include advocacy group, community education on mental health and substance use disorders, challenging myths and stereotypes, and creating open conversations that normalize seeking help. The Center engages in peer-led leadership training so individuals can become advocates for themselves and others, speaking at public forums, legislative hearings, and community meetings. Staff work with local and state partners to support policies that improve access to affordable treatment, housing, employment, and wraparound recovery services.

The Center also partners with faith communities, social service agencies, healthcare providers, and recovery organizations to address root causes and social determinants of health — such as food insecurity, homelessness, and unemployment. Through events, and resource fairs, the center amplifies the voices of people in recovery, spotlighting stories of resilience and hope.

Each month, members at The Gather Place take an active role in advocacy through a dedicated group that empowers them to understand and address issues impacting their lives. In these sessions, participants learn about current developments and proposed changes that may affect their income, benefits, housing, and access to services. The group also serves as a vital forum where members can bring forward personal concerns or community challenges, discuss them openly, and work together to identify possible solutions.

FY 2026 Goals

In Fiscal Year 2026, The Gathering Place-Community Wellness Centers will place a strong focus on increasing community awareness and expanding participation in its programs. The goal is to ensure that more residents especially those affected by mental health challenges, substance use recovery, and related life stressors know about the Center's services, feel welcomed, and feel encouraged to take part. To achieve this, The Gathering Place will strengthen its outreach through presentations at community events, partnerships with local organizations, and regular visits from trusted partners. Promotional materials and success stories will be shared through the Centers newsletter, social media campaigns, and direct engagement with community groups, faith organizations, and service providers.

The Centers will also look for creative ways to connect with potential participants from hosting in house events and wellness workshops to inviting the public to attend social activities like community meals, art therapy sessions, and seasonal events. By combining personal outreach with wider publicity efforts, The Gathering Place aims to increase awareness, build trust, and welcome more individuals into a supportive environment where they can heal, learn, and grow.

In addition, the Centers aims to recruit at least 15 community members into its active advocacy network. These members will become vital voices for change, helping to elevate awareness and drive community

action. To support this goal, the Gathering Place will take part in community events, sharing information about the center ensuring that information is accessible and empowering to all. The monthly calendars will also reflect discussion groups dedicated to mental health and substance use recovery, creating opportunities for education, open dialogue, and community engagement.

Partnerships will continue to be a cornerstone of the Center's advocacy work. These partnerships will allow for improved wraparound supports that address the full spectrum of needs for individuals in recovery, from housing and employment to healthcare and social connection.