

Community Wellness Centers- The Gathering Place

Description

MHA's Community Wellness Centers are 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 connection and personal growth. Through workshops, group activities, and social events, the Centers encourage self-expression and skill-building while supporting individuals in achieving their wellness goals. Program elements include peer support/self-help activities, socialization, training and education, wellness and recovery activities, community outreach, and advocacy. Through these elements, the Centers aim to maximize members' independence, increase their quality of life, and cultivate a community of recovery that supports the development of healthy social support systems.

Personnel

Each location has a Program Director who provides oversight, support, and supervision to the programs as needed. The Community Wellness Centers are staffed by a full-time Wellness Manager at each site who supervises the part-time Support Specialists, bilingual Support Specialists, and Community Resource Navigators. All staff members are professionals with lived experience and personal experience with mental health and/or substance use recovery.

Caseload

In their second year of operation, the Morris and Sussex Wellness Centers engaged 387 new individuals with lived experience of mental health and/or substance use challenges. Members of The Gathering Place in Morris and Sussex Counties visited the Centers an impressive 11,542 times throughout the year. Each Center serves a unique population within its respective community and structures its schedule to meet the needs and interests of its members.

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

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.

The Community Wellness Centers' performance indicators measure overall consumer satisfaction, accessibility (whether the Centers are open during times convenient for members), effectiveness (the number of visits made to the Centers), and efficiency (the ease of accessing the Centers). During this fiscal year, 100% of members surveyed reported that they were satisfied with the Community Wellness Centers. Our Centers are available after typical business hours on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays to meet the needs of members. In FY 2026, the Morris Center recorded 4,783 member visits, while the Sussex Center recorded 6,759 member visits, for a total of 11,542 visits.

Consumer Satisfaction Surveys

Wellness Managers at the Centers focus on engaging new members and ensuring that the Centers remain safe and welcoming environments. We continue to hold weekly community meetings called **Community Empowerment Meetings**. During these member-run meetings, all attendees are able to voice concerns in real time. Members participate in the planning process for new groups, trips, and activities, as well as efforts to engage new members and identify ways to improve the Centers overall.

In Fiscal Year 2026, 100% of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with the CWC. Additionally, 91% felt that the peer providers were welcoming, friendly, and professional, and 87% of consumers who attend the Community Wellness Centers reported that they attend more than once a week. In addition, 100% of members surveyed reported that they had been introduced to new friends while attending the Centers.

Program Highlights

This fiscal year, The Gathering Place served as a vital sanctuary for adults navigating mental health and substance use challenges in Morris and Sussex Counties. By fostering healing, connection, and personal growth through peer-led groups, supportive services, and meaningful socialization, the Centers stand as a beacon against loneliness and isolation. They provide a respectful, stigma-free space where individuals feel accepted, empowered, and supported on their journeys toward recovery and whole-health wellness. Regular visits from partners, including Nourish, CHOICES, County College of Morris, Sussex County partners, Hope One, Navigating Hope, JBWS, Family Promise, and other treatment and program providers, have been instrumental in connecting members to critical resources, education, and care. These collaborations strengthen the Centers' ability to offer comprehensive, person-centered support that extends beyond the walls of the program. In addition, members were offered the opportunity to participate in vital trainings, including Narcan administration and CPR and First Aid certification.

The Community Wellness Centers offer a rich array of groups and activities designed to support mental, emotional, and social well-being. Therapeutic and recovery-focused offerings include art therapy; depression and anxiety support groups; All Recovery meetings; mindfulness and meditation sessions; coping skills and stress management groups; and peer-led discussions on self-esteem and healthy relationships.

Wellness and life-skills programming features wellness and nutrition workshops, document assistance, creative writing circles, and book club. Movement and mind-body practices include yoga and gentle movement classes. Social connection is nurtured through game nights, music jams, and walking clubs that foster inclusive networks where participants feel welcome, valued, and connected.

In addition, both Centers participated in a Rutgers University project to pilot an innovative intervention, **Positively Happier**. The program integrated positive psychology with psychiatric rehabilitation techniques and consisted of a structured framework of 15 modules designed to enhance participants' skills related to happiness. Key elements included harnessing individual strengths, fostering grit, enriching social connections, and building resilience.

Community meals at the Centers are about far more than food; they provide 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 opportunity 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, reduce isolation, and foster a sense of dignity. Through meal preparation and gardening, participants do more than cook; they connect, share stories, and build a shared sense of pride and belonging. This year, we took an additional step toward shifting from staff-run meals to meals that are planned, scheduled, prepared, and served by members, with love.

In FY 2026, both Centers participated in a nutrition-focused group called **Food & Mood**, where members learned how specific foods can support good health, stabilize mood, and boost energy while also having the opportunity to taste and experience these foods firsthand.

This year, both Centers were awarded a Wellness Grant through the NJ Peer Connection Whole Health Learning Collaborative, a statewide initiative funded by the New Jersey Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services to advance whole-health approaches in wellness centers. Grant funds support community outings and enhanced wellness programming, including sporting events, movie nights, bowling, and visits to zoos or museums to promote social connection and community engagement. Funds also support the hiring of external health and fitness professionals to lead yoga, pet therapy, and similar activities, expanding the quality and variety of health-focused offerings.

Members have already enjoyed special events such as movies, pet therapy sessions, and a trip to the zoo, as well as a community picnic filled with good food, laughter, and fellowship. These experiences give participants an opportunity to step away from daily challenges, connect with peers, and enjoy the simple pleasures of friendship and shared traditions.

Advocacy Activities

Core advocacy activities include advocacy groups, community education on mental health and substance use disorders, challenging myths and stereotypes, and creating open conversations that normalize seeking help. The Centers engage members 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.

Each month, members at The Gathering Place take an active role in advocacy through a dedicated group that empowers them to understand and address issues impacting their lives. During 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 2027 Goals

In Fiscal Year 2027, The Gathering Place 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 Centers' services, feel welcomed, and feel encouraged to participate.

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' newsletters, social media campaigns, and direct engagement with community groups, faith organizations, and service providers.

The Centers will also explore creative ways to connect with potential participants, from hosting in-house events and wellness workshops to inviting the public to attend social activities such as community meals, art therapy sessions, and seasonal events. By combining personal outreach with broader 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 aim to recruit at least five community members into an active advocacy network. These members will become vital voices for change, helping to increase awareness and drive community action. To support this goal, The Gathering Place will participate in community events, sharing accessible and empowering information about the Centers. Monthly calendars will also feature 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 Centers' advocacy work. These collaborations will enable improved wraparound supports that address the full spectrum of needs for individuals in recovery, from housing and employment to healthcare and social connection.