

Ex-Jericho Hampton Inn To House Homeless; Community At Odds

The former Hampton Inn in Jericho is set to house dozens of families experiencing homelessness. But not everyone supports the plan.

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The former Hampton Inn Hotel on Jericho Turnpike is set to become the Jericho Family Support Center. (Google Maps Image)

JERICHO, NY — A former hotel in Jericho will serve as a transitional housing facility for dozens of Long Island families experiencing homelessness amid the coronavirus pandemic, but the project faces varied responses from both residents and local officials.

The Nassau County Department of Social Services plans to relocate dozens of families currently living in "squalid, inhumane conditions" in various motels in Jericho to a new location at the former Jericho Hampton Inn Hotel, said county Legislator Arnie Drucker of Plainview.

The new program, called the Jericho Family Support Center, has 80 rooms and will serve as a transitional housing facility, according to the social services department. Families are expected to be housed at the center for six to eight months each, and 19 students will be added to the Jericho School District this upcoming school year and at no cost to the district.

Nassau County currently has 43 residential shelters. 27 of those are family shelters, which cannot accommodate many larger families, according to Nancy Nunziata, commissioner of the department. At the moment, 117 families reside in those shelters, whose services are largely provided by nonprofit organizations. But another 104 families are in motels and without additional housing services around the county.

In short, Nunziata told Patch, Nassau County does not have enough shelter space, especially without the Jericho Family Support Center.

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The facility has been approved and licensed by the state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. It will be first state-licensed housing facility in Nassau County that offers services to help individuals who are housing insecure find permanent housing, Christine Geed, a spokeswoman for county Executive Laura Curran, told Patch in a phone interview.

"The goal here is really to get people out of homelessness," Nunziata said. "We want to be able to put people in housing and have them able to sustain themselves."

Around 50 families currently reside in four motel facilities in Jericho near the former Hampton Inn, Nunziata said. "They're there; they've been there without incident. And some of the students already attend the school district."

But the kinds of housing services offered at shelters, like the ones soon-to-be offered at the Jericho Family Support Center, are not available at the motels, making it much more difficult for people to transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

"The problem in Nassau is that we have always had many motels," Lorraine Baum, deputy director of the social services department, told Patch in a phone interview. "And that has not always been very conducive to helping people finding permanent housing ... because there are no services."

At the Jericho Family Support Center, on the other hand, services will be provided by Community Housing Innovations, an organization funded through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and state Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. Nassau County has no jurisdiction over the facility itself.

Community Housing Innovations will manage operations, 24/7 emergency housing, the development of permanent affordable housing and down payment assistance for first-time buyers. The organization will also provide case management services, childcare, recreation and education services, housing support and 24/7 security to help Jericho Family Support Center residents transition out of homelessness and into permanent housing.

Housing insecurity is not a new problem in Nassau County. But it has been exacerbated by the pandemic and its associated economic fallout, Nunziata said, leading to nearly triple the usual level of demand for housing support services and public assistance.

And that level of demand is not going down any time soon. The social services department is preparing for a new level of need as federal pandemic unemployment assistance ends and the state's eviction moratorium expires at the end of the month.

"Not unlike the food insecurities, we are now seeing housing insecurities here in Nassau County," Geed said. "This program that CHI has is exactly the kind of program we're looking for in Nassau County: one that is transitional, where it's not long-term that [families are] staying in this housing, but with the program supports put in place so that these families are able to transition out of emergency housing and get into long-term housing on their own."

"We're proud of the fact that we're going to be able to provide services such as this for our homeless population," she added.

Three meals a day will be provided to residents, and the property developer plans to apply for permits to replace the former hotel's pool with a childcare center, according to the social services department.

The site will not be used as a halfway house, and individuals previously convicted of sex crimes who are seeking housing will not be allowed at the facility because children will be living there. The site also will not offer a drug treatment program, and no methadone will be administered.

Resident Opposition

Many neighbors have expressed opposition to the plan, stating concerns about the impact families experiencing homelessness may have on the Jericho School District, where the center is located, and fears about the presence of housing insecure families in the neighborhood.

A GoFundMe campaign called "[Concerned Jericho Parents](#)" raised more than \$83,000 in five days in opposition to the plan. It has organized a committee of residents and retained a lawyer.

"If this shelter is put into place, it will have long term, far reaching impacts on our school district and community," the campaign reads. "We urge you to please join us and raise money to support our efforts to force local officials to STOP this facility from opening in order to help preserve the safety and well being of our families and neighborhood."

The campaign cites support from Town of Oyster Bay Supervisor Joseph Saladino, who said he opposes the project and cited zoning violations.

"It's very clear that this parcel is zoned for short stays only, and New York State specifically designates short stays as no more than 30 consecutive days," Saladino told Patch in a phone interview.

"The zoning code has been around for decades to protect integrity of neighborhoods," he added. "This is clearly an obstruction of the rules and of the codes of the Town of Oyster Bay and this use does not belong in that location."

Saladino said the Town sent a letter in opposition to the project to Curran and county officials, including Drucker and Legislator Josh Lafazan. The letter included a notice of violation and a stop work order.

"Zoning is subjective, so the County is going to have their one interpretation and the Town is going to have another interpretation," Geed said. "And depending on jurisdiction, sometimes the State's requirements will supersede that. That is just something we're all looking into. There is no finite answer to the zoning question."

Geed added that the location of the Jericho Family Support Center on Jericho Turnpike "is certainly not in a residential area."

"Some people are very concerned about having these kinds of things in their particular neighborhood. This is clearly in a business district," she said, emphasizing that the families to be housed at the center already live in nearby Jericho motels. "They will still be in the community. They will just have a better facility and much better services that will help benefit them long-term."

A petition addressed to Curran, called "[Stop the Housing Site For Homeless Shelter in Jericho](#)," has also garnered more than 1,800 signatures against the facility.

Jericho resident Jing Huo expressed his opposition to the project.

"After six months when those families move, their kids still have a right to remain in the district," he told [News 12](#). "The accumulation of these kids is going to grow so large that eventually it could crash the Jericho School District."

According to the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students' temporary district — the Jericho School District, in this case — holds no financial responsibility for those students. Any time a student is temporarily placed into a new school district, the child's "home district" or "district of origin" remains "financially responsible for the students' education and transportation to school," according to the social services department.

In addition, the act stipulates that if a family living in temporary housing obtains permanent housing outside of their temporary school district, the child is permitted to complete the school year in the temporary district. For the remainder of the school year, the temporary district will directly bill the new, permanent district for the cost of the child's education. Upon completion of the school year, the student must be enrolled in their new permanent district.

Huo declined to comment for this story.

Transparency Concerns

Drucker and some residents also expressed concerns about the transparency of the project.

Drucker, who represents the district in which the family support center will be located, said he did not receive notification of the plan until July 23.

"These plans were communicated to my office in a woefully inadequate manner. That must change moving forward," he wrote in an Aug. 2 Facebook update. "Although it is my belief that any homeless family is entitled to live in a safe, dignified and humane temporary shelter, the communities affected by the relocation or placement of these homeless families deserve to be informed and have their opinions heard."

William Ferro, president of Jericho School District's Board of Education, referenced the district's back-to-school planning in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic as part of his concerns about the project.

"From a perspective of school planning the lack of true transparency is troubling," Ferro wrote in a Aug. 2 statement posted on Facebook. "Working feverishly to reduce class size and create a safe environment for all, we looked at our current enrollment and planned accordingly. The addition of 19 new students is certainly not an impediment to what we planned. 100 plus students in a district of 3000 could be."

The social services department expects that 19 students will join the Jericho School District this upcoming year, and in grades from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Rosemarie Rosenblum, another resident, also expressed concern about the perceived lack of communication between county legislators, including Curran and Drucker, residents and the social services department. In a comment on Drucker's Aug. 2 Facebook post, Rosenblum wrote that these concerns "far outweigh the impact of safe and secure housing for our housing insecure children and families."

"Nassau County engaged directly with the impacted stakeholder in this situation, the Jericho School District," the department said, referencing a Jan. 14 discussion with superintendent Henry Grishman. Grishman did not respond to a request for comment.

Geed added that the county executive's office communicates with social services every day.

Community Support

Other community members expressed support for the project and sought ways to help the families to be housed at the family support center.

Some commenters on Drucker's post asked how they could help and offered to donate supplies and, in one case, leftover Girl Scout cookie money.

Jericho resident Sivan Komatsu organized a petition called "[Every Family Deserves A Roof Over Their Heads](#)," in support of the transitional housing facility. At the time of this story's publication, the petition had garnered 390 signatures.

On the petition, Komatsu called the opponents' claim that the housing site will endanger local families "fear-mongering" and lacking in evidence.

"This common myth used to villainize the homeless is false," Komatsu wrote, citing a Johns Hopkins University study. "In other words, residents of the facility will not pose a threat to students any greater than any other individual living in the area will. On the other hand, stopping these families from living safely will undoubtedly threaten their wellbeing, which matters just as much as ours."

Robin Schnitzer, a Jericho High School graduate and current resident, sent the county a video of herself expressing support for the project and the community housing organization.

"I think it's long past time that we stop vilifying what's unfamiliar," Schnitzer said in the video, adding that she would hope to have access to a support program like the Jericho Family Support Center if her family ever found themselves in a situation of homelessness. "I would hope that people wouldn't assume we're dangerous just because we're experiencing poverty."

She added that the neighborhood has the "space and the resources and the school to share. And it feels that simple," she said. "The zoning for the property is just red tape. I'm looking forward to sharing all of the resources and opportunities I had growing up. What kind of school are we if we cherry-pick who is allowed to attend and who is allowed to live here?"

In his post, Ferro, the Jericho school board president, referenced other school districts that have served as temporary homes for students.

"We are not the first school district to be faced with families of limited means being placed in their system," he said. "In the last few years alone, countless dozens of students arriving from other countries were placed in districts such as Hempstead and Brentwood — districts already bursting with significant class sizes and without the adequate financial resources to sustain such increases."

He also addressed the Jericho residents who oppose the project.

"To those I say: this is a true opportunity to help others in need. A chance to show our children that there are others that may not look like us that nonetheless deserve an opportunity to get back on their feet and succeed," he said. "I guarantee you that none of these displaced families nor their children choose to be homeless."

Geed added that especially within the unprecedented context of the pandemic, "this is a time where we all need to step up, reach out our hand and say, 'What can we do to help you?' not, 'Please go away,'" she said.

"We really need to start being a little bit more compassionate, a little bit more understanding and lot more supportive."

"We are doing the very best we can to put [these children] in a situation where they can grow and they can sustain themselves in an environment that is conducive to family living. And that is really vitally important," she said. "They're not criminals. They're just going through a really difficult time, and we want to be there for them."