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Suicide-Prevention Phone Acquired by National Museum of American History

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has acquired a suicide-prevention phone from Dutchess County, N.Y. The phone is one of two installed on the Mid-Hudson Bridge in Poughkeepsie in 1984. Together they were the first to be placed at a known suicide-attempt spot and connected to a 24-hour help hotline.

The Dutchess County suicide-prevention initiative was conceived by Kenneth Glatt, county commissioner of mental hygiene, in response to a high number of suicide attempts at the Mid-Hudson Bridge.

The original phones, placed at police-identified locations on the north and south sides of the bridge, were low-power AC radio transmitters, ensuring maximum reliability. The opening of the case door activated a direct connection with mental health professionals at the county's psychiatric emergency service.

"This acquisition not only enhances our electricity holdings but also offers insight into how Americans have met mental health challenges," said Brent D. Glass, director of the museum. "This phone is an example of American ingenuity in technology and in how we care for one another."

The installation of the phones on the bridge and the help line were a joint effort between the Dutchess County Department of Mental Hygiene and the New York State Bridge Authority after it was determined that installing physical barriers to deter jumping was not a viable option to due expense and maintenance. The original phones were replaced by newer technology in 2009.

"It is a great honor to have the phone accepted by the Smithsonian, as it brings national recognition to our achievements in the area of suicide prevention," said Dutchess County executive William R. Steinhaus.

"Our suicide-prevention phones have been important tools that have led to many lives being saved. This piece

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of our county history is now a part of this famous museum's collection and, thus, a part of American history.”

The bridge phone joins the museum's electricity collection, which includes many historic communications devices such as early telephone equipment from Alexander Graham Bell and Samuel F. B. Morse's prototype telegraph transmitter and receiver.

The National Museum of American History collects, preserves and displays American heritage in the areas of social, political, cultural, scientific and military history. To mark the 50th anniversary of the Greensboro lunch counter sit-in, the museum explores stories of freedom and justice, both in Washington and online. To learn more about the museum, check <http://americanhistory.si.edu>. For Smithsonian information, the public may call (202) 633-1000, (202) 633-5285 (TTY).

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