

Turnover info key to delivering quality services

I suppose it's not really news when a government bureaucracy argues for withholding information that the taxpayers — and their elected representatives — ought to know.

Still, that's the gist of what Montgomery County Health and Human Services Director Charles Short said in the May 31 *Journal* ("Turnover study evokes criticism," front page) about a budget provision I proposed that was adopted unanimously by the County Council.

In this provision, our Health and Human Services department is required to ask direct-care service contractors in the county to report their employee turnover in each program that uses county funds and their starting salaries and health-care coverage for direct-care employees.

Mr. Short criticized this requirement as "bad government," arguing that it will be too much of a burden for his agency and for contractors to collect and provide this information.

That's a bunch of baloney.

Organizations that accept public funds expect to be accountable to government for their performance. Further, any organization worth its salt should be able to have at its fingertips information about turnover, starting wages and health-insurance coverage.

We all know that excessive employee turnover

VIEWPOINT

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hurts the quality of care delivered by those who tend to our kids, care for our frail elderly and work with county residents with developmental disabilities.

Quality of care is linked to continuity of care.

Therefore, everyone — providers, employees, service recipients and taxpayers — wins if we can help our social-service providers strengthen their ability to attract and retain qualified employees. Conversely, everyone loses if our social-service providers continually have high employee turnover.

Continuity of care becomes difficult, quality suffers and productivity declines when organizations devote more and more time to recruiting and training new employees. This is a vicious cycle that some social-service providers have told us

they are experiencing. The council needs to know the extent of this problem.

It's good government to gather relevant information about contractors that deliver services to our most vulnerable residents. It's bad government not to evaluate the quality of those services. And it's bad government not to hold organizations receiving public funds accountable for their performance.

Each year, the County Council approves about \$40 million in grants through approximately 400 contracts with numerous social service providers. That is \$40 million in taxpayer funds awarded to private organizations for the important purpose of delivering vital health and human services to our most vulnerable residents. We need to do a better job of evaluating the effectiveness of these services. This measure is a first step.

Moreover, Mr. Short is mistaken if he thinks the County Council has adequate information about the amount of turnover, wage levels or health-care coverage provided by county contractors who deliver human services. The only documented information we have is about employee turnover in 1999 among service providers for the developmentally disabled — gathered as a result of a budget provision I proposed (and the Council adopted unanimously) earlier this year.

That report showed the annual employee turnover rates among these providers varied substantially from 9 percent to 54 percent, with an average turnover of just under 30 percent. The fact is we don't know why those turnover rates varied so much, and we don't know if the same variation exists for other county contractors, such as child-care providers. The proposed survey will fill in the gaps.

Mr. Short suggests that it is important to understand why employees of social-service contractors have left and where they have gone. I couldn't agree more. However, those questions should be posed directly to former employees, rather than to the organizations the employees have left.

Similarly, I would ask current employees why they stay with an employer and what changes, if any, would help retain them.

Good government requires good information — information that will help us insure the quality of services our children, our frail adults and their families need and deserve.

That's exactly what this disclosure measure will provide — no more and no less.

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