



# Raise Your Voice!

## Poverty in Montgomery County

A Public Forum & Community Resource Fair

January 28, 2015

The Activity Center at Bohrer Park  
Gaithersburg, Maryland

# FORUM REPORT

*Community Concerns and Recommendations about Child Care,  
Housing, Jobs, and Transportation in Montgomery County*



In Partnership With:



## Introduction

On January 28, 2015, the Community Action Board, in partnership with the City of Gaithersburg, hosted a public forum called *Raise Your Voice! Poverty in Montgomery County*. The program included two consecutive focus group sessions. In each session, four simultaneous focus groups were held on the following topics: Child Care, Housing, Jobs, and Transportation. Participants selected one of these topics for each breakout session, allowing them the opportunity to speak about two important issues impacting low-income residents.

Over 40 members of the community participated in focus groups at the forum. Focus groups included low-income residents and service providers.

The following report summarizes the information, including policy recommendations, received in the focus groups. Participants were asked to describe some of the barriers they face in relation to the specific topics and were then asked to brainstorm ways to remove these barriers. The Community Action Board hopes that the feedback and recommendations shared at the forum will be used by service-providers and policy-makers alike to address the needs of low-income residents, helping them move towards self-sufficiency.



# Child Care Focus Groups

Facilitators:

Mary Bennett, Montgomery County Community Action Board  
Barbara Warman, Montgomery County Commission on Child Care

*Forum participants reported experiencing a great deal of stress related to balancing work, school and requirements for child care vouchers. Participants highlighted numerous barriers that prevent parents from securing affordable, high-quality child care. Participants suggested several ways to improve child care.*

## Part I - BARRIERS

### **Barriers to child care include:**

- Cost of child care and little support from child care vouchers:
  - Long waiting lists
  - Cost – Even with vouchers, many parents struggle to afford child care and pay their other bills
  - Strict Requirements:
    - Child Support – Voucher applicants must apply for child support and many are reluctant to do this
    - Work hours – Voucher recipients must work 40 hours per week and many recipients can only find part-time work. Job-seekers cannot receive a voucher until they find employment.
    - Income eligibility requirements were reported to be the biggest barrier for parents.
  - Temporary Cash Assistance child care vouchers usually cover the entire cost of child care as long as recipients remain on TCA
    - Parents report feeling that they would need to quit their jobs in order to qualify for this voucher program if they are not currently receiving childcare vouchers. Sometimes going on TCA is the only way to get a voucher
    - Some parents report a reluctance to seek a higher paying job for fear of going above the income cut-off
- Transportation/Location:
  - Affordable, adequate child care often entails long commutes – especially when using public transportation



## Part II – IDEAS & SOLUTIONS

### **Ideas for improving child care in the County include:**

- Universal all day Pre-K (3 and 4 year olds)
- An increase in the number of child care subsidies provided in the County and the dollar amount of each subsidy
- Increased parent support
- Increased access to information about licensed child care providers
- Child care in all of the schools
- Additional training for informal child care providers
- Additional after-school options
- Changing the requirements for child care subsidies to better reflect the hours of low-wage workers, costs of care and cost of living in Montgomery County
- Additional outreach to immigrant communities
- Increased ability of child care providers to reach parents who need services
  - Create a service similar to Angie's List for child care providers
  - Enlist PTA's to help inform parents
  - Linkages to Learning (this is already in some schools, but not all)
- Marketing campaign – Promote the benefits of early childhood education and developmental childcare
- Transportation – Link public transportation and shuttles to daycare providers

# Housing Focus Groups

Facilitators:

Chandra Harris-Jackson, Montgomery County Community Action Board  
Gail Gunod-Green, Montgomery County Community Action Board

*Participants were very clear about the need for additional housing options for low-income residents. Participants described housing in Montgomery County as “exclusive” and “almost impossible to get.” They also highlighted the inequalities that exist within the County. Participants offered several recommendations for ways to address the many housing issues impacting the County.*

## Part I - BARRIERS

### **Barriers to housing include:**

- A serious lack of affordable housing
- Housing Programs:
  - Programs are limited – it is challenging to get into these programs
  - Housing vouchers –
    - Waiting list – not open for new applications and too long
    - Discrimination – Voucher payments are often less than fair market rents often forcing low-income families/individuals to live in concentrated areas
  - Overqualified vs. under qualified –
    - Many find that they earn too much for certain programs and not enough for others
    - What happens to those in the middle-income?
    - Concern about losing essential services if earn small amount more each month
  - Prioritizing families with children limits options for singles
  - Contingencies regarding housing program eligibility
  - Enforcement of MPDUs – Concern about builders adhering to the requirements of the program when constructing new projects
- Costs:
  - Even with subsidies, housing is too expensive in the County
  - Formulas used to determine subsidies do not factor in costs of daily living/ expenses
- Communications:
  - Lack of information and lack of resources
  - Lack of information about program qualifications

- Dissemination of information needs to be improved
- Rights and Responsibilities of residents needs to be clear
- Newcomers – those who are new to the area need access to housing information and education about these programs
- Homelessness:
  - Limited resources
  - The system is slow
- Housing standards/quality:
  - Lack of County regulations to ensure housing quality
  - Infestations
  - Over-crowding
- Language access – translation and interpretation resources are needed for non-English speakers
- Not enough affordable housing options for seniors
- Need info on PHA (Public Housing?)
  - Policies and procedures
  - Questions about program compliance and policing programs
- Credit challenges – residents with limited credit or a poor credit history face challenges when seeking housing in rental properties
- Impact: Lack of affordable housing results in stagnancy
  - Recommend programs that support families
  - Support both parents – including father
- Lack of clarity regarding housing charges (HOA's)

## Part II – IDEAS & SOLUTIONS

### **Ideas for helping residents obtain affordable housing:**

- Communications/ Education:
  - Improve dissemination of info about housing for people at various income levels
  - Education/Promotion of existing resources (FSS, MPDU, MPP)
  - Publicize annual housing fair
  - Use ESL, Head Start, other venues to help convey information
  - Create TV channel dedicated to Montgomery County services
  - Use faith-based community resources to disseminate information
  - Develop better communications for those with Limited English Proficiency
  
- Seniors:
  - Provide additional affordable housing for seniors
  - Improve education about senior housing options
  - Promote more affordable housing for seniors
  
- Singles:
  - Develop shared Housing opportunities for singles/seniors
  - Create more options for singles (individuals without children)
  
- Housing Programs:
  - Reduce the length of wait following housing program applications being submitted
  - Increase the payment amount for housing vouchers so that recipients are not confined to such limited areas in the County
  - Advocate for more Federal money for affordable housing
  - Enhance outreach regarding existing affordable housing resources - concerted education
  - Ensure that builders are adhering to the requirements of the MPDU program when constructing new housing projects
  
- Public/private consortiums to create affordable housing
- Promote personal accountability in taking initiative
- Rent control
- Develop programs to support families – both parents – including father

# Jobs/ Workforce Development Focus Groups

Facilitators:

Laurie-Anne Sayles, Montgomery County Community Action Board  
Mariana McNeill, Career Catchers, Inc.

*Jobs were a primary concern for participants in the forum. Participants shared their struggles and the difficulties they face when trying to obtain employment without adequate training and education. Those who obtain employment often struggle to make ends meet due to low wages and lack of benefits. Participants discussed several ways to improve the job-seeking process in the County.*

## Part I - BARRIERS

### **Barriers to obtaining employment include:**

- Interviewing/ Job-seeking concerns:
  - Gaps in employment – need to be prepared to explain these gaps
  - Lack of feedback from employers following submission of resumes/ applications
- Lack of training/ job skills:
  - Residents need more training to obtain jobs that pay a *living wage*
  - Need skills training *specifically during periods of unemployment*
  - Concerns about the effectiveness/availability of GED/diploma process
- Transportation:
  - Residents need help getting to interviews and to work
- Homeless residents lack basic resources:
  - Shelter
  - Showers/ hygiene
  - Nutrition
  - Clothing
- Limited English Proficiency:
  - Language barriers exist and make it difficult to communicate
  - Language barriers can restrict opportunity
  - Having an accent can make finding a job more difficult
- Discrimination:
  - Criminal history – How to overcome the stigma?
  - Unfair hiring/ illegal hiring process
  - Sex
  - Age

- Race
- Culture
- Computers/Technology:
  - Limited ability to research jobs and prepare for interviews
  - Limited computer literacy
- Resources:
  - Existing resources are not connected
  - Service providers and job-seekers need to improve the sharing of information and know more about what services are already available
- For those who find employment:
  - Need to learn how to negotiate a living wage
  - Limited grace period for supportive services – services are suspended shortly after you find employment

## Part II – IDEAS & SOLUTIONS

### **Ideas for helping County residents obtain employment:**

- Training and Education:
  - Create more training programs
  - Educate residents so that they know their rights
  - Establish skills training programs for those in a period of unemployment
- Resources/Information:
  - Create a directory of job/employment resources to put at Metro stops
  - Create a phone app similar to MC 311 – a “One Stop Shop” for resources
  - Reduce restrictions to accessing existing resources
  - Provide information about employment discrimination policies
  - Provide clothing/grooming resources for interviews and jobs
  - Establish programs to help residents purchase affordable computers – although such programs already exist, residents are often unaware of them
  - Increase access to/share existing services in the community
- Transportation:
  - Establish subsidies to help people get to work or job interviews
  - Improve access to transportation, including the frequency of transportation services (i.e. some areas only have rush hour and no weekend service)

- Limited English Proficient/ Immigrant Community:
  - Improve the process of foreign degree transfer of credit
  - Provide free language and citizenship classes
- Allow flexible schedules for parents
- Service providers:
  - Increase outreach to the public
  - Increase professionalism for front desk staff
  - Promoting the *No Wrong Door Policy* – integrating and coordinating services/ point of entry

### \*\*Part III – INFORMATION EXCHANGE\*\*

*This focus group also took some time to share information about helpful resources for job-seekers that already exist in Montgomery County.*

#### **Existing Information/Resources to Promote in the Community:**

- Ban the Box – it is now illegal to ask about criminal history on a job application in the County
- Affordable Computers for low-income residents:
  - Project Reboot
  - Project Phoenix
- Clothing:
  - Dress for Success
  - Suited for Success
  - A Wider Circle
- City of Gaithersburg Community Partners Meetings

## Transportation Focus Groups

Facilitators:

Pam Lockett, Montgomery County Community Action Board  
Stacy Coletta, Montgomery County Community Action Board

*Participants voiced their concerns about several issues related to transportation in Montgomery County. Residents report that they need more services in their areas. More up-to-date information about schedules, costs, and the various programs available to riders needs to be readily available to residents. Participants also brainstormed ideas for improving transportation in the County.*

### Part I - BARRIERS

#### **Barriers and concerns regarding transportation in the County:**

- Lack of/ limited service:
  - Waiting Time: Schedules are too limited – riders must wait a long time for transportation
  - Ride-On hours – “peak hours” are too long and “all-day service” is too limited
  - Need bus stop at 5320 Marinelli Road [this is the Bethesda House - Catholic Charities transitional housing program]
  - Need Express Bus service between Lakeforest and Shady Grove
  - There is no mid-day service to Manna Warehouse on Gaither Road
  - Limited hours and availability of public transportation – especially in Up-County and East County regions
  - Access in East County – riders have to travel far to get to familiar stores
- Communications:
  - Public transportation information is not readily available
  - When riders call MC 311 to ask when the next bus will arrive, they are often told to use an application on their phone to obtain this information, instead being given the information
- Metro Access: Clients carrying large amounts of food can have 3 hour trip
- Language Access: Schedules in Spanish need to be readily available
- Special programs for riders: Programs for seniors, youth, those with disabilities are confusing due to the many rules and requirements
- Youth service:
  - If students miss the activity bus provided by MCPS, there is no public transportation available to them

- Bus stops are not close enough to high schools
- Locations where teenagers learn to drive are not safe – this currently takes place on busy streets and this can be dangerous
- Cost:
  - Tokens should be based on income-level
  - Youth fares increase after “kids ride free” program ends

## Part II – IDEAS & SOLUTIONS

### **Recommendations for improving transportation in the County:**

- Language Access:
  - Publish Spanish timetables/schedules in Spanish newspapers
  - Post paper timetables in Spanish at Catholic Center, grocery stores, and other venues where Spanish-speaking community would have access
- Scheduling/Convenience:
  - Schedule Express Bus between Lakeforest and Shady Grove
  - Establish bus stop at the Bethesda House, 5320 Marinelli Road
  - Offer shuttles between HHS service points and key non-profits – should be free or low-cost for low-income residents
  - Publish transportation information on “real time” applications
  - Expand Ride-On hours so that there are fewer peak hours and more all-day service
- MC 311: Instruct staff at MC 311 to tell callers when the next bus will arrive and other scheduling information
- Bikeshare:
  - Publicize where Bikeshare stations are
  - Ensure that stations are located where people can see them/use them
- Tokens: Set-up a way to even-out distribution
  - Could the County become the distributor of tokens?
  - Could this become a card-based system with value added?
- Advertising: Promote the ability of non-profits to advertise on buses. This is a captive audience.
- Youth:
  - Move bus stops closer to high schools
  - Create safer areas where youth can learn to drive (not on the busy streets)
- Safety: Make the County a more walkable, safe community

# **The Montgomery County Community Action Board**

The Community Action Board is the governing body for the Montgomery County Head Start Program and the Community Action Agency. The Board serves in an advisory capacity to the County Executive and County Council, and as an advocate on behalf of the poor and working poor of the County. Members are appointed by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council.

## **2014-2015 Community Action Board**

Chair: Matthew J. Green, Jr.

Vice-Chair: Chandra Harris-Jackson

Alejandro Becerra  
Lisa Conlon  
Tom Ferleman\*  
Gail Gunod-Green\*  
Pam Lockett\*  
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Walter Woods

Stacy Coletta  
Lily Echeverria  
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