



Montgomery County Head Start Parents Policy Council Testimony  
County Council FY21 Budget Hearing  
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Thank you, Council President Katz, Council Vice President Hucker, and members of the County Council, for accepting this testimony, which is submitted on behalf of the Head Start Parents Policy Council. My name is Zelda Wafer-Alonge and I am the Chair of the Policy Council. The Policy Council includes the parents of children in MCPS Head Start and PreK programs and serves as both the governing body for Head Start and the advocacy group for Head Start/PreK.

First, I want to thank the Council for its support of the Early Care and Education Initiative and its recent leadership during the COVID-19 emergency. The public health emergency has hit many Head Start and PreK parents and caregivers especially hard. We appreciate your inclusion of funding for safety net services in the Council's COVID-19 Economic Relief Act. Safety net services are even more important now when so many people are losing jobs or having hours cut. We ask that this funding continue after the emergency situation ends, since the effects will be felt for years to come.

The closure of MCPS and child care facilities has left many families scrambling to find child care, or to rearrange their work schedules to care for their children. For lower-income parents, these challenges are even more acute. Many of these parents are in low-wage jobs that lack benefits, including paid leave. They may also work in essential businesses where they must choose between going to work and possibly risking their health, and staying home to care for children and to avoid exposure to COVID-19, missing out on income in return. These are difficult choices

for families who, well before the current emergency situation started, were struggling to make ends meet. Low-income families often have little or no savings, meaning that they are at an extreme disadvantage when unexpected challenges arise. The Self-Sufficiency Standard recommends that a family of three with one adult, one preschooler, and one school-age child needs to put \$402 into savings each month in order to have an emergency savings fund large enough to cover the basic necessities for 3.4 months (the average length of unemployment).<sup>1</sup> This amount is already assuming that the adult qualifies for unemployment, which many of our Head Start parents do not. Moving forward, we must do more to help families maintain employment, move towards self-sufficiency, and prepare for the unexpected. The Policy Council urges the Council to continue to explore opportunities to increase wages and work supports in the County.

Both Head Start and PreK classes provide a much-needed source of high-quality early care and education for families. I am happy to report that the services and outstanding support provided by the Head Start/PreK program have continued during this unprecedented situation. Many Head Start parents have expressed their appreciation for the regular communications from staff, including exceptional guidance on social-emotional issues for young children during this time of uncertainty. Parents truly appreciate the ongoing services, including assistance from Family Support Workers (FSWs), who address a wide range of family issues and provide referrals to critical services. These family supports, including mental health services, are tremendously valuable, both on a day-to-day basis and in times of crisis. Unfortunately, FSWs are stretched thin right now. While FSWs are supposed to have a staff ratio of one to 35 students, currently, the ratio is one to 50 – 75 students. This is especially problematic given the increasing numbers of children and families experiencing trauma and increasing mental health referrals. We ask the Council to consider additional funding to hire more FSWs, along with administrative support staff, to better serve Head Start/PreK children and their families.

A difficult situation like the one we are in now really highlights the tremendous value of high-quality early care and education programs. The Policy Council has been thrilled to see the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/>

expansion of part-day Head Start classes to full-day programs in recent years, and the addition of more PreK classes. We support the Kirwan Commission's recommendation that preschool be available to all three and four-year-olds in the state. In Montgomery County, there is a particular need for more three-year-old spots. Many young children benefit from the Early Head Start program, only to be left without a spot in Head Start when they turn three. This is not only problematic for the children who miss out on the benefits of the instruction and supportive services they would receive, but it poses an extreme financial hardship for families. The average cost of preschool at a child care center in the County is over \$16,000.<sup>2</sup> This is nearly one third of the total annual income for a family with two adults working at the current County minimum wage for small employers. While Child Care Scholarships are helpful, many parents still struggle to cover this expense, especially given the very high cost of housing in the County. We encourage the Council to add additional funding for child care assistance and to continue to expand free preschool options for three-year-olds.

As the County moves forward with its implementation of the Early Childhood Education Initiative, we ask that the Council consider a mixed delivery system that includes both public and private child care options. Due to the critical shortage of high-quality affordable early care and education, it is essential that we explore all options for expansion. Serving as providers for essential personnel during the COVID-19 emergency has highlighted the important role private providers play. Moving forward, providers need training and added support to comply with accreditation requirements. The Policy Council recommends that the Council include center-based providers, as well as family child care providers in the Initiative, and that the Council provide adequate support to providers so that they can comply with all requirements. We also encourage the County to collaborate with MSDE to support a mixed delivery system with the newly awarded Child Development Grant funds. These funds could be used to support private providers, but MSDE's strict requirement for preschool teachers to be certified teachers is simply not feasible or affordable for child care centers and family child care providers. We ask that the County work with MSDE to make adjustments to these requirements in order to accommodate private providers.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.marylandfamilynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Montgomery.pdf>

Additionally, we wanted to note that the current situation has posed many challenges for these local small businesses. I personally understand this impact as a small business owner who works one-on-one with clients, not being able to serve them due to the closing of my business during this time. With the Governor's order that all child care facilities close during the public health emergency, providers are facing extreme hardship. While some providers chose to remain open to serve the children of essential personnel, many had to close to protect themselves and their families. These providers are really struggling now. One of our members, an established child care provider herself, has described the confusing and often mixed messages providers have received regarding applying for loans and grants, many of which are not available to sole proprietors. This information is no doubt even more difficult to understand for a provider whose first language is not English. We greatly appreciate the funding the Council has allocated to small business assistance. We ask that additional guidance be provided, and that special attention be given to child care providers so that they can remain in business throughout the crisis and continue to serve County families in the future.

We know that the current circumstances have posed many challenges, especially for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. As planning continues, we hope that you will include both child care providers and members of the low-income community in the process as they are in the best position to provide input on community needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our priorities with you. The Policy Council looks forward to working with the Council to support parents of young children during the COVID-19 emergency and in the future.