Dear Montgomery County Council sitting as the Board of Health,

I am writing to ask you to permanently remove the mask mandate in Montgomery County. You have done an excellent job following CDC guidance, but the CDC is providing guidance for an entire country, and you have the privilege of being able to focus on one single county. The CDC needs to provide guidance that acknowledges that only 67% of eligible Americans have received one vaccine dose, while in Montgomery County that number is 99.9%. Given these high vaccination rates, and our collective belief that vaccines work, can't we rely on vaccines to do their job and stop requiring everyone to wear masks? Masks can of course continue to be worn by anyone that chooses to wear them and businesses can continue to require masks if they choose. This is a perfectly reasonable solution and acknowledges the power of the vaccines and the value of personal choice.

Montgomery county will continue to lose business to nearby counties (Howard with similar positive case rates and no mask mandate as well as Fredrick & Fairfax) if the mask mandate continues.

At this point, in our highly vaccinated county, it is unreasonable to continue to use cases as the metric to determine whether masking is required. In our county of 1.1 million people, in the last week, 544 people have tested posted for COVID (technically for the virus that causes COVID, SARS COV2). This is .05% of the population of the county. Furthermore, we have no idea how many of these cases are asymptomatic or mild. If the intent of COVID mitigations is to prevent severe disease, shouldn't we be focused on the prevalence of severe disease? The best proxy for this is hospitalization. The county does not do a good job of disclosing hospitalization data. The dashboard only includes data through Oct 23. On that day, 73 in Montgomery County were hospitalized with COVID, .007% of the county population. During this most recent wave, this number had peaked at 133, .012% of the county population. Hospitalizations are down 45%. Shouldn't that be the falling metric that we should watch to determine if masks are needed?

It is now widely agreed that COVID is endemic, it is here to stay and will continue to circulate like cold and flu viruses. Zero covid is not a possibility and should not be pursued as a goal. We will be counting cases forever if we don't figure out an off ramp. And that off ramp should be a focus on preventing severe disease through vaccination, which we have achieved with our 99.9% vaccination rate. It's now time to end mask mandates in Montgomery County.

Thank you for your leadership
Kara McNulty