

**SPECIAL APPROPRIATION TO THE FISCAL YEAR 2022 OPERATING BUDGET; MONTGOMERY COUNTY GOVERNMENT; DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES; PEDIATRIC MOBILE MEDICAL VEHICLE; \$450,000 (SOURCE OF FUNDS: GENERAL RESERVE FUNDS)**

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COUNTY COUNCIL FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND**

**MARCH 29, 2022**

**SUPPORT**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the Montgomery County Council in support of the request for a Special Appropriation to the Fiscal Year 2022 Operating Budget for the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services in the amount of \$450,000 for a Pediatric Mobile Medical Vehicle.

My name is Carol Cichowski. I am resident of Montgomery County and have lived in District 1 since 1988. I am a retired Federal employee and worked over 30 years on education policy for the U.S. Department of Education. In my work to improve education outcomes for all children and close the gaps among various groups of children, it was clear that the inequities in our society in such areas as employment, housing, and health care interact to affect all aspects of life for those who experience them and also have a harmful effect on the community at large. For example, there is no question that access to health care by children is related to their success in school and future opportunities.

The pandemic has clearly heightened awareness across the country about the impact of inequities on families, especially in the area of health care. In that regard, I have been heartened by the commitment in Montgomery County to think hard about how to effectively deliver both information and services to populations in the County who are disadvantaged in some way because of language, immigration status, income, location, or other determinants of marginalization.

While the County has done an outstanding job in vaccinating its residents, particularly its seniors, needs remain, particularly in the case of children. In February, it was reported that fewer than 60 percent of children 5 to 11 years old, who have been eligible to be vaccinated since November, were fully vaccinated, despite opportunities being offered for school-based services.<sup>1</sup> The youngest children (below the age of 5) will be even harder to reach once they become eligible.

We will never achieve 100 percent coverage of, or be able to completely protect, every subgroup in our County from variants of the current virus or future threats to their health. However, I think it is incumbent on the County to make every effort to address the barriers to

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Bohnel, "Health official says vaccine for children under 5 might be available this month," Bethesda BEAT (February 10, 2022), <https://bethesdamagazine.com/bethesda-beat/coronavirus/health-official-says-vaccine-for-children-under-5-might-be-available-this-month/>

health care and to look for innovative solutions to meeting the health needs of our very diverse community. I applaud the investments the County made early in the pandemic to provide culturally competent information and testing services to people in the County who might otherwise be inadequately informed or left out because of their status or location. At this juncture, I think it is important to maintain that commitment to, and focus on, those in our community who are not well connected to health care.

For these reasons, I am supportive of investing in a mobile medical unit to bring pediatric health services to families as quickly as possible who may not otherwise have, or seek access to, health services for their children, especially vaccinations, because they are newcomers, uninsured, undocumented, uninformed, distrustful of the process or otherwise challenged because of their work schedules or location or lack of transportation.

I have never met the Director of Casa Ruben, Dr. Ligia Peralta, who will be heading up the proposed project for Casa Ruben, but I am impressed by her outstanding track record in pediatric care and her very strong commitment to serving the most vulnerable in the community. Her leadership at Casa Ruben has already had a significant impact on getting people vaccinated in the County.

I also believe our County has served its residents well when it has turned to community-based organizations to meet the needs of its residents and fostered partnerships between its public agencies and private organizations. In this case, it is notable that the proponents of the project have secured support from the Robert I. Schattner Foundation for operating expenses and will be coordinating with other community-based organizations and the Department of Health and Human Services to help ensure that the project's services are well-targeted and complement the services provided by others.

In conclusion, there is no question that it is in the public interest to address disparities in health outcomes among the County's residents. In my opinion, the County cannot afford to pass up the opportunity to invest in a partnership with a community-based organization that promises to deliver health services to some of its neediest residents at a time when it is particularly urgent to do so.