

MARCH 29, 2022
1:30 p.m.

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COUNTY COUNCIL
FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

SUPPORT

Special Appropriation - DHHS - \$450,000
for Pediatric Mobile Medical Vehicle; and Amendment to Designation of
Entities for Non-Competitive Contract Award Status: Casa Ruben, Inc.

Dear Members of the County Council for Montgomery County:

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

We are grateful to County Council President Gabe Albornoz and Councilmember Friedson for sponsoring this Special Appropriation, to Councilmembers Nancy Navarro and Sidney Katz for co-sponsoring this Special Appropriation, and to each Councilmember for their consideration of this Special Appropriation. We extend our appreciation to the Robert I. Schattner Foundation for its commitment to partner with Casa Ruben and Montgomery County DHHS, to Casa Ruben for leading this initiative, to DHHS for their collaboration, and to the residents of Montgomery County for their kind support.

We are writing to offer our strong support for the Special Appropriation that would create a public private partnership among Montgomery County DHHS, Casa Ruben, Inc., and the Robert I. Schattner Foundation to develop a pediatric mobile clinic for Montgomery County. Public-private partnerships benefit our government and communities as they bring together the expertise and resources of the two sectors for a common cause.

Our County is committed to, and invested in, efforts to address health disparities and the elimination of barriers to accessing healthcare. Initiatives such as this one not only will enhance and complement the hard work that our County is doing but also help extend our reach to all in their communities in innovative ways. Studies have shown that mobile medical care offers a unique way to reach people who are underserved, under resourced and/or underinsured and who may not access mainstream healthcare for many reasons, such as issues of trust, information, language, finances, immigration status or simply location.

The goal of this innovative model of access to primary care for County children and adolescents is to deliver high quality, compassionate, pediatric, and adolescent care directly to underserved and under-resourced Montgomery County children and youth in a welcoming mobile environment, where their vaccine and health needs are addressed, so that they are available to enroll in school, thrive in life, learn, play, and engage in the community. **As residents of Montgomery County and advocates for youth and children across the State of Maryland, we can think of few other initiatives that are more critical for the health, safety, and well-being of our children and communities. Food, shelter, and medical care are three of the most fundamental basic needs for an individual.**

Montgomery County is home to a large, diverse group of children and adolescents. Youths represent almost one in five Montgomery County residents according to the Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center (as of 2019). All youth and children need primary pediatric care, including timely immunizations. In addition, Montgomery County also is a primary destination for unaccompanied children seeking to unify with

families. Many of these newcomers are in need of receiving age-appropriate vaccines and primary care services. There is a particular urgency around vaccinating all school aged children so that they can be enrolled in our schools and begin learning as soon as possible. Despite widespread efforts to reach underinsured, under resourced and underserved children, there remain many without access to medical care. All Montgomery County children need and deserve access to quality medical care, and this public-private partnership offers an additional resource for the County to reach and care for its residents, particularly the most vulnerable.

As we all know, the global pandemic compounded challenges around access to healthcare while exacerbating the overall public health crisis. As the pandemic unfolded, children and youth missed routine vaccinations and health visits, suffered major disruptions in their lives, and experienced trauma and behavioral changes. There was a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities and populations. As noted in the Council's posted public hearing notice information:

- The March 23, 2022, Pulse Report⁵ indicates that while 26% of County children age[s] 5-11 years old are Hispanic, 21% have received a first dose of COVID vaccine
- While 20% of County children aged 5-11 are Black or African American, 16% have received a first dose of COVID vaccine.
- First dose vaccinations for County children ages 5-14 are at 59% or below in zip codes 20903, 20904, 20866, 20851, 20860, 20879, 20876, and 20841
- For the general County population, census tracts that have below average first dose rates are in Silver Spring, East County, Aspen Hill, and Gaithersburg/Germantown/Clarksburg corridor

As further noted therein:

the Racial Equity Impact Assessment transmitted on January 26, 2022, by the County's Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice for the Immunization and Vaccines for Children Grant noted that since the collection of data on COVID vaccinations for children ages 5 -11 began, consistently smaller shares of Black and Latino children - compared to their representation in the population- have received their first dose of the COVID vaccine...An equitable distribution would guarantee that all children are fully vaccinated and gain protection against COVID-19...

At the same time, Casa Ruben found that there were delays in children receiving their needed vaccinations and this was a particular issue for newcomer children and children in certain under-resourced zip codes. As a result, Casa Ruben sought to increase its reach by not only offering in clinic vaccines but also partnering with other organizations in the county to provide "pop up" clinics, resulting in Casa Ruben successfully providing more than 7,000 immunizations to Montgomery County children during the pandemic.

Por Nuestra Salud y Bienestar and the African American Health Program/Black Physician Healthcare Network successfully demonstrated throughout the pandemic how leveraged partnerships with community-based organizations can expand reach to those who may not have otherwise accessed COVID vaccination and testing resources. Similarly, the pediatric mobile clinic will partner with many of the other organizations in the County to help achieve an equitable distribution by collaborating on target areas and connecting children and families to health care homes.

Children who receive comprehensive healthcare and treatment, learn better, attend more classes and are more successful in school. Partially vaccinated children frequently miss class due to unnecessary illness and emergency room visits. An unexpected benefit of a comprehensive approach is that this model will

encourage parents to seek care for the whole family including themselves. A new consciousness and behavior of health prevention for the whole family including themselves that will carry on generation after generation.

Casa Ruben, Inc. is uniquely situated to lead this pediatric mobile clinic. Casa Ruben is a non-profit organization that provides comprehensive primary care, vaccinations, referrals to behavioral health care, and HIV and GBLTQ care predominately to low-income people, immigrants, and families of color. Casa Ruben provides these services with language and cultural competence. Casa Ruben is a participant in the Maryland Vaccine for Children and its Immunet online database allowing it to track immunization gaps, schedules, and missing vaccines.

Casa Ruben's founder, Dr. Ligia Peralta, is an expert on innovation in health care for extremely under-resourced communities in Maryland (and globally) and has designed an innovative model in partnership with community-based agencies and churches to enhance the access to care and reduce cost. Her leadership is rooted in collaborating with patients to create a health care system free of judgement, barriers, or gaps.

"I'm turning everything around to apply all the knowledge of my career to the community most in need," she says.

Dr. Peralta is a physician scientist with a long record of program development with integrated services and most recently trained in health care innovation at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Peralta brings experience in developing and implementing this well-proven, evidenced based One-Step model of care. She has expertise in delivering culturally competent care in the community and accessing hard to reach individuals to engage them in care. The model facilitates access by utilizing the services of well-trained culturally competent expert pediatrician/adolescent medicine expert, nurse(s), and social worker(s) to assess, vaccinate and link youths to care in their own communities. Her research on health systems innovation led her to join the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Innovation and Global Leadership Program, and in 2011, she was inducted to the Maryland Hall of Fame and appointed to the state's Health Care Commission.

It is with the utmost respect that we ask for your support for this **Special Appropriation**.

With every best wish,

Catherine Leggett, Resident, Montgomery County, Maryland

Tracey Friedlander, Resident, Montgomery County, Maryland