

Testimony re: Bill 10-23 to establish an Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Commission IN FAVOR by Sara Portman Milner

My name is Sara Portman Milner and I am the co-founder and Director of Student Services at Sunflower Bakery. At Sunflower Bakery and Café Sunflower, we are dedicated to our mission of providing skilled job training and employment for adults 18+ with learning differences in pastry arts, production baking, barista service and front-of-house operations. We are an inclusive work-force training organization. Our vision is an inclusive society where all persons, regardless of their differences, have opportunities to lead productive lives.

It is our belief that by establishing an Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Commission in Montgomery County, that an under-represented and under-heard group of residents will have the opportunity to have their interests presented, prioritized and addressed through the link to the County Council, County Executive and on to critical State agencies and legislators. Precedent has been set for this through the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities. I served on what was then known as the MC "Commission on the Handicapped" from 1983 for about 7 years. Much was accomplished in moving forward the agenda for physical access to/in buildings, kneeling buses to accommodate wheelchairs, hearing access through interpreters provided, vision access with large print materials or voice alternatives, and more. However, that accessibility was focused on people who could function quite independently, once those accommodations were made. The same progress was not made for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD). Functioning independently is not realistic for a large majority/number of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, who literally need support from birth to death. Such individuals never "age out." So many areas of greater unmet need for expansion of services have already been identified through the Developmental Disability Advisory Committee of the MC Commission on People with Disabilities. It is time to move this discussion from an advisory committee to a County Commission.

A universal need is for individuals to have full, productive lives within their own communities. Public Law 94-142 and IDEA legislation have made public education available for students with ID/DD in the least restrictive environments, most often in their own communities. Laws have made it possible for inclusion in schools even through age 21, as necessary. Many children have benefitted from that. However, what happens when those same students graduate from high school, whether with a certificate or a diploma. Families experience a "cliff," where there are not enough options available in order for those students to continue to move on in the community having a meaningful, productive life. In 2019 Maryland had an unemployment rate for working age adults with cognitive disabilities of 34%. No longer can students transitioning from school to work have the option of working in a job that pays sub-minimum wage, performing repetitive tasks. Now they are expected to find "Competitive Integrated Employment" where work is performed by a person with a disability working alongside non-disabled workers and compensated at a comparable and market-driven wage to perform the same tasks." However, employers are not generally interested in hiring people at minimum wage, whose intellectual and developmental disabilities result in working at a slower pace, not being able to work a 40-hour work week, needing on-site support from a job coach and more. Montgomery County could do more to incentivize businesses to offer opportunities to individuals with ID/DD. Having a Montgomery County Commission on People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities will make it possible to bring this and so many other issues that have been set aside in these times of "celebrating diversity," to the fore.

In addition to having worked for 45 years as a professional social worker in Montgomery County, with my career having been devoted to inclusion of individuals with disabilities in all aspects of community life, I have intimate knowledge of the often-unmet and life-long needs of individuals with intellectual

and developmental disabilities. I have a 59-year-old brother with Down Syndrome whose life expectancy at birth in 1963 was somewhere between 15 and 22 years. Even as he joins other “senior citizens” in aging, he has unique needs that require the services of specialized resources in almost every aspect of his life. In his youth, there were no options for inclusion in school, much less assistance for transitioning to any work other than sheltered employment upon completion. Times have changed; Montgomery County has often provided leadership in so many ways. Let’s not let the families of folks with ID/DD down, rather let’s lift them up through a Commission that will allow those unheard voices to be heard and have those unmet needs addressed in our own community.