



Testimony of

Lewis I. Askew Jr., Esq.

President, Board of Trustees

The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF)

Montgomery County Council

Hearing on Fiscal Year 2024 Operating Budget

Council President: Evan Glass

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Thank you, Council President Glass and all Council members present for this opportunity. I am Lewis I. Askew Jr., President of the Board of Trustees for the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF). NCCF is a comprehensive regional child and family serving non-profit with an administrative campus in Bethesda, Maryland. The agency is over 100 years old and has a long-standing relationship with Montgomery County as a provider of critical facilities and essential services for this community.

This evening I would like to specifically address funding for the Black Physicians and Health Care Network (BPHN) sponsored by NCCF. This partnership originated with the Montgomery County Council in 2020 as a urgent response to the deadly COVID crisis in the county's Black Community. The current program model emerged out of a desire to address the disparity for COVID mortality rates among the Black and African Diaspora residents in the county and reflects NCCF's vision of a community that addresses the needs of its citizens. BPHN has inspired and supported the Black Diaspora across the African American, African, and Caribbean communities where there are real and quantifiable gaps. This program has brought the Black community in this county together. Our 100 outreach partners and supporters believe in this initiative and are equally committed to partner with the Montgomery County Dept of Health and Human Services to sustain this model initiative as do myself and my fellow Board members.

It is well documented that Black people distrust the American health care system; some argue that racism is mainly to blame for the problems that Black people face when they visit the doctor. The documentary *The Deadliest Disease in America* contends that Black people avoid medical treatment because are not treated or spoken to with respect. A 2021 UCLA study shows that the percentage of Black physicians in the United States is 5.4, a rise of only four percentage points over the last 120 years. The BPHN model directly addresses this and the need for Black individuals to access culturally competent health care directly and effectively to save lives.

Yet, as a Board we cannot allow NCCF to sustain financial losses of more than \$400,000 and incalculable reputational damage. The county's justification for altering

model is at its heart an equity issue. We have heard DHHS claims that the Federal funding for COVID has run out, and the County Executive's claims that there is no need for parallel systems because Montgomery County's clinic system will be undergoing improvements. However, from my vantage point the County's unwillingness to expand investment in a newly established but wildly successful program has nothing to do with COVID money. Rather, I would argue it has more to do with the desire to push a destabilizing agenda back onto the community.

The working poor, which is who this program primarily serves, cannot sustain under these substandard conditions. Blacks need to participate in the economy and they need to be healthy to do it. Without the BPHN interventions many of the 1600 residents we served would have ended up in emergency rooms or dying because of untreated illness or a lack of routine care in a trusted environment. We cannot accept a lower standard of care and mortality in this wealthy county. NCCF is seeking additional funding through grants, donations, and alternative resources from every place available, however as a nonprofit we cannot operate a program at a deficit indefinitely while the county decides how to remake their community health model.

The county must not turn away from this proven and successful model without understanding the significant impact on the Black community. In the short term, Black residents will stop going to the doctor, desist, or mental health provider, and Black doctors will stop participating because their contributions are seen as valueless. In the long term the effect will be a loss of trust and a reminder of the insincerity of the offer of help from Montgomery County government. The Black community did not have a well-built health infrastructure here in this County before BPHN and as soon as it was constructed it is now deemed too successful and expensive. This is a familiar trope for Black people in America.

NCCF cannot afford to indefinitely bear the brunt of the cost or suffer the bad public relations impact for a proven model that works across the Diaspora. I urge you to find the additional money (\$1M) to keep this program operating as originally intended. As a new County Council, I ask you to keep the promise that your predecessors made to NCCF and the Black community when they worked to conceive and execute this program