

Testimony for the Montgomery County Council

FY24 Operating Budget

April 11th, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to represent EveryMind and the mental health interests of Montgomery County's children and families.

My name is Karishma Sheth, and I am the Chief Program Officer at EveryMind. I have had the honor and privilege of working with many of you to improve the mental wellness of our community, and I look forward to continuing this work together.

I am here today not only as a nonprofit leader asking for critical funding for mental health, but also as a proud, lifelong Montgomery County resident. I immigrated to the United States as a toddler from India. My parents brought us to the US for the American dream, a dream where my brothers and I would have access to a high-quality education and opportunities to reach our full potential. I am pleased to say my brothers and I are proud MCPS graduates working as leaders and small business owners right here in our County.

I have dedicated my life to ensuring equitable and accessible mental health services for my fellow residents, working diligently as a leader in a community I am proud to call home. Now, I also get to watch my nieces and nephews grow up in this County, which is amazing to experience. There is so much to celebrate and appreciate, and yet I am acutely aware of the youth mental health crisis that our children and youth are currently experiencing. Therefore, on a personal and professional level, I want to ensure that nonprofits like EveryMind can continue to provide necessary mental health services in our schools for our children and their families.

We appreciate the County Executive's recommended 3% increase in nonprofit contract funding. We also recognize that in order to continue to be the safety net this County needs, we must ask this Council to consider an additional 3% increase. At a minimum, the increase must match the rate of inflation. This 3% increase is not about expanding services. It is about fairly paying our frontline teams and the staff that support them so that we don't lose these talented professionals to other Counties, for profit employers, and other industries where they may feel more valued. The loss of staffing for nonprofits is happening across the country. The National Council of Nonprofits has reported that since the pandemic, salary competition has exacerbated even more of the ability for nonprofits to hire and keep qualified staff. This increase would strengthen our ability to retain licensed and certified professionals who are combatting homelessness, depression, trauma, and suicide in our county. If we cannot retain a qualified workforce, our community will suffer.

Furthermore, we must address the dual crises our young people are facing – the Youth Mental Health Crisis and the Fentanyl Crisis. We ask the Council to consider increasing mental health



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resources in schools, especially middle schools, where there is a significant gap in services. Linkages to Learning is currently offered at 24 elementary schools and 7 middle schools. A few additional middle schools also receive some mental health services through School & Community Youth Services. However, this is not enough. We need to expand our resources to provide mental health services in middle school communities who are in urgent need of mental health services and support. We are thrilled that every high school now has a Wellness Center or Bridge to Wellness. This is a strong step in the right direction. Now we must do this for EVERY middle school as well.

In addition, we recently learned of a significant shift in funding for twelve Linkages to Learning schools in the Mid County region. As a result, some Linkages to Learning providers in high need schools may receive less than \$200,000 per school while others may receive as much as \$350,000. We urge the Council to increase funding for Linkages to Learning so that each Linkages school receives at least \$375,000. Funding at this level will help providers retain vital staff such as community school coordinators who work in collaboration with MCPS community school liaisons to meet the unique and varying needs of Linkages school communities. Community school coordinators provide vital connections with our local businesses, churches, synagogues, universities, nonprofits, and volunteers, bringing in much needed mental health resources and services at no cost to our families and students. Program supports include ESOL, civic education, and computer literacy classes for our parents, as well as parent coffees which have become support groups for parents, discussing a variety of topics including how to read the MCPS report card, how to help their children with their homework and dive further into topics like domestic violence, spotlighting the close relationship built between the coordinators and our parents. Community school coordinators also support students across the school community through holiday giving, school supplies and food distributions and drives, afterschool activities through various clubs and groups focused on STEM, story time, athletics, and cooking, summer camp programming, and much, much more.

Please help us maintain and increase quality mental health services and staff in our schools. With the youth mental health crisis at an all-time high, we must add resources and services. We urge you to find additional funding to provide every child in Montgomery County with the opportunity to reach their full potential, just like my brothers and I were able to.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Karishma Sheth, MPH

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