



April 2, 2025

The Honorable Kate Stewart
Montgomery County Council
Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue, 6th Floor
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Council President Stewart,

I am writing to share Interfaith Works' (IW) recognition and appreciation of Montgomery Community Media (MCM) as a valuable resource in our community. MCM, with its talented, dedicated staff and myriad of programs, is worthy of continued support and investment in the County's FY26 budget.

During the past year, IW has benefited from MCM's work and partnership:

- We partnered with MCM to host a series of Community Conversations on economic justice.
- Their reporters have covered several key stories, including our back-to-school drive (August 2024), the devastating fire at our Women's shelter (July-August 2024), and the IW Volunteer Resource Fair (May 2024). In addition, their reporter personally participated in the recent Point in Time survey; the resulting story gave our community an insider's view into the growing problem of people experiencing homelessness.
- IW staff have benefited from MCM's helpful seminars on using digital media to tell our stories and educate about the issues our neighbors are facing.

In this time of shrinking media outlets which cater to a particular viewpoint, MCM serves as an unbiased source of information for issues affecting our community. In short, MCM is not a "nice to have" – it is an essential resource in this community. Without it, the voices of residents, nonprofits, businesses, and government would be silenced.

Please feel free to reach out to me with any questions.

Sincerely,



Courtney Hall
CEO



**PREPARED TESTIMONY OF
COURTNEY HALL
CEO, INTERFAITH WORKS
ON FY26 BUDGET
April 7, 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the FY26 operating budget. Interfaith Works provides programs to help our neighbors challenged by poverty and homelessness find a pathway to stability.

We appreciate the County Executive's proposals to hold the line by preserving several programs that help residents gain access to housing, as well as funding for additional security at Progress Place.

We fully recognize that the budget situation this year is extremely challenging. But we believe supporting programs that prevent homelessness would be the most cost-effective strategy, keeping people stably housed and out of the shelter system.

Interfaith Works provides two successful prevention programs. We ask you to include funding for these programs in the base budget for FY26.

IW CONNECTIONS

IW Connections helps connect residents of Montgomery County to essential resources. Resource Coordinators, who are bilingual in English and Spanish, meet with clients to conduct comprehensive needs assessments and make referrals to appropriate partner providers. Connections provides emergency financial rental and utilities assistance. Eligibility is based on Montgomery County residency to help those with incomes at a level less than or equal to twice the Federal Poverty Level.

The most crucial of Connections' services is providing emergency financial assistance to assist with overdue rent and unpaid utility bills.

In FY24, Connections served more than 600 families with nearly \$282,000 in emergency assistance with the support of private foundations, individual donors, and PEPCO. However, that is not enough. While we were able to help 600, we were unable to assist 843 families.

- We do not turn people away. We direct them to other options but those often can only provide limited help. Unlike other programs, we can help before eviction notices are issued, before families are legally entangled and on the brink of losing their homes. Connections' emergency financial assistance program alleviates clients' financial burdens and helps people stay in their homes.

- On average, Connections receives 20-25 calls per day from people in desperate need. We estimate that **60-70% of these calls and referrals originate from County representatives, including County Councilmembers**. These calls are often 15 to 20 minutes long. Connections resource coordinators provide a trusted, listening ear, and can draw on their knowledge of resources in the community to assist each caller in a personalized manner. Staff often hear from clients how thankful they are that we even returned their call, as this is not always their experience with other organizations.
- The program serves a crucial, unique role. Compared to other options, including County programs, Connections is a low-barrier program, only requiring a handful of eligibility documents. For example, Connections does not require clients to have an eviction notice, or a utility disconnect notice to qualify for assistance. This allows Connections staff to be proactive in helping individuals address their financial needs without them reaching a crisis state first.
- We also serve households that need just a bit of assistance while they get back on their feet, such as missing work due to illness and therefore not getting paid, or having to pay for an unexpected expense such as a car repair. In these cases, we are often able to resolve the crisis or come close to resolving the crisis with our contribution alone. We serve many working clients who simply do not earn enough, and we serve clients who are on a fixed/limited income.
- **IMPACT:** In FY24, Connections served more than 600 households through financial support, distributing \$281,550 in emergency assistance with the support of private foundations, individual donors, and PEPCO. However, that is not enough.
- **CHALLENGE:** During that same period, Connections had 1,698 client inquiries seeking financial assistance. Of those, we were unable to assist 843 clients. Some were ineligible for assistance. But for many of them, it was due to a lack of funding. To be clear, we do not turn people away. We attempt to direct clients to other options but those often can only provide limited help.

REQUEST FOR CONNECTIONS: We request that financial support for this essential prevention program be included in the base budget, so we do not have to direct clients to find other, less available sources of support because we have run out of money. **For FY26 we are seeking \$580,000** (out of a total budget of \$975,000) for Connections. Note that we are not requesting the full program budget but are asking the County to leverage funding we are receiving from private donors, corporations, and the State of Maryland.

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF BASE BUDGET FUNDING

With the additional funds requested, we would have sufficient funding to hire a third full-time resource coordinator and **serve an additional 1,150 households** with emergency financial assistance at our current maximum of \$400 for past due rent and \$500 for past due utilities. This would enable us to serve clients we could not in the past when our philanthropic funds ran out, plus additional clients. We could also explore raising our maximum contribution to \$1,000 per household for a past due rent or utility balance. With this change, we could still serve an **additional 520 households** with emergency financial assistance.

IW VOCATIONAL SERVICES PROGRAM (VSP)

VSP helps under- and unemployed neighbors find employment, serving people who have limited income and who may have experienced homelessness. Some are shelter residents. Many are seniors. A significant portion speak English as a second language. VSP supports and empowers those who are underemployed and unemployed to develop life and career skills for long-term self-sufficiency. VSP's bilingual vocational counselors (Spanish and French) work one-on-one with clients until they successfully gain employment.

- A large component of VSP's clients are recent immigrants, many of whom do not yet have proficiency in English. Nearly half of the clients (48%) are between the ages of 45-64; current clients range in age from 16-82 years. Nearly 70% are women. Many VSP clients have particular needs that would have made them ineligible – or undesirable – for other employment programs. VSP clients have experienced homelessness, violence, illness, and other traumas. VSP's individualized approach helps increase their chances of employment success.
- VSP provides clients with assistance in building their resumes, interview preparation, job applications, training costs, and stipends to participate in training classes. Once the client has secured employment, vocational counselors check in with them monthly for an additional year to assist with any difficulties they might be experiencing.
- VSP launched its Paid Training Program (PTP) in response to clients' challenges with completing training that would help them gain access to better-paying jobs. While clients appreciated that VSP covered the training fees, they often could not finish the training due to problems with childcare, lost wages while in training, and other financial barriers. With PTP, VSP began paying clients \$15/hour for the time spent in training. As a result, the completion rate shot up to more than 90% and many clients were able to secure better paying jobs in turn.
- VSP recently launched HIRE MOCO, an initiative to connect local employers with qualified candidates. To date, HIRE MOCO has co-organized job fairs with partner organizations and worked with specific employers to arrange interviews with selected candidates.
- **IMPACT:** VSP has served an average of 242 clients per year over the past five years, 75% of whom are women. Among those securing full-time positions are mothers and single mothers, single heads of households, youth, seniors, and individuals experiencing homelessness, all of whom face additional constraints in balancing work and other life responsibilities. The average hourly wage earned in FY24 was \$18.53 – 8% higher than the minimum wage. **From FY20-24, VSP has placed 545 people in jobs, resulting in \$12 million in initial annual wages earned.**
- **CHALLENGE:** We could do much more with additional resources. The program already has the necessary infrastructure to support a larger client base, including a comprehensive database, employer relationships, and proven strategies for job readiness and placement. To reach 400+ clients, we would need to hire 2-3 new vocational counselors.

REQUEST for VSP

Interfaith Works is requesting **\$430,000 (out of an FY26 budget of \$855,000) for VSP**. Note that we are not requesting the full program budget but are asking the County to leverage funding we are receiving from private donors, corporations, and the State of Maryland.

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF BASE BUDGET FUNDING

Currently, we serve an average of 242 clients per year with five vocational counselors. The additional funding would enable us to add another vocational counselor, **increasing the number of clients we can assist by about 15% or a total of 290 clients**. This growth is expected to lead to more job placements, particularly salaried positions (so long as there continues to be funding for the Paid Training Program), and a reduction in the time clients remain on the waitlist. More people with jobs means more residents who are contributing to the County tax base.

With the additional staff, we also would be able to **focus more intentionally on referrals from shelters and supportive housing programs**, which tend to be a high-need population. Additionally, the funds could be used to hire vocational counselors with diverse people and coaching skills. Helping clients achieve self-sufficiency requires understanding their unique circumstances with empathy, while also holding them accountable. Hiring experienced professionals with expertise in job placement would accelerate progress and improve outcomes.

CONCLUSION

We are seeking \$580,000 for IW Connections and \$430,000 for IW VSP in the County's base budget for FY26. This would provide a portion of the costs of these two effective prevention programs, with the remainder being provided through the State of Maryland, private philanthropy, and individual donors.

Our message is simple: With County investment in these prevention-oriented programs, we will be able to serve more people so they can find sustainable employment, remain stably housed, and avoid moving into the shelter system. That is a cost-effective strategy with deep impacts on our community.

Thank you for considering our request. I am happy to meet to discuss our requests in more detail.