

Esteemed County Council,

My name is Tatiana Pineda, and I reside in Gaithersburg, MD. I am writing to you as an advocate for our special needs community, requesting a significant increase in the budget for adaptive and inclusive programs in Montgomery County. This increase is vital to expand, provide more training and ensure affordable access to these programs for all residents, guaranteeing that children, adults, and their families with special needs receive the support they deserve.

The rising prevalence of special needs among children is undeniable. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2025, approximately 1 in 36 children in the United States will be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This represents a dramatic increase from 1 in 166 children 20 years ago, and 1 in 2,500 children 40 years ago.

- Information provided by the Commission on People with Disabilities has stated an estimated 85,000 people with disabilities living in the county, based on 2019 U.S. Census Bureau data.
- One in 10 Montgomery County households includes a child or adult with Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This information is from The Arc Montgomery County.

These statistics underscore the urgent need for expanded resources.

This issue is deeply personal for me. As a mother of an incredible, non-verbal son with autism, I experience firsthand the immense challenges faced by families with disabilities. These challenges extend beyond financial burdens to encompass significant emotional strain on parents and caregivers. Notably, the divorce rate for couples with children with special needs, particularly those with ASD, can be as high as 87%, significantly exceeding the general population.

Our lives are often consumed by the complex and costly needs of our children. Families routinely spend thousands of dollars on evaluations, assessments, diagnoses, therapies, specialized diets, and assistive devices. The financial strain is compounded by the emotional toll of navigating these challenges.

Investing in robust adaptive and inclusive programs in Montgomery County is not merely a matter of compassion; it is a strategic investment in our community's well-being. By providing essential support to children, adults, and families with special needs, we can strengthen family units, reduce the risk of separation, and foster a healthier, more cohesive community.

Recent budget cuts targeting these vital programs pose a catastrophic threat to individuals with disabilities, their caregivers, and direct support professionals. Our community is vulnerable, and we rely on the County Council to uphold its commitment to protecting our most vulnerable citizens. We are no longer a minority; we are a significant and growing segment of our population.

Therefore, I urge the County Council to:

1. Prioritize a substantial increase in the budget for adaptive and inclusive programs.
2. Ensure that these programs are affordable and accessible to all residents.
3. Protect these vital programs from further budget cuts.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Tatiana Pineda de Henriquez.