

Montgomery County Council Testimony
April 7, 2025

Good evening. I am Debra Munk, Chair of the Board of Directors for InterFaith Works and a small business owner. And I am here to make a deal. However, what I would first like to address with you is my passion: education. As a former MCPS teacher and administrator, I have personally seen how education can change the trajectory of one's life. I am also aware of the economic benefits, both to an individual, the family, and society when a person is able to improve their employment opportunities, status, and income through education.

For this reason, I was drawn to the work of InterFaith Works. You may be aware of our shelter and housing programs. You may have even volunteered at our Essential Services Clothing Center. However, you may not be aware of our Vocational Services Program or VSP. This program is unlike other programs that aim at helping individuals obtain employment. Yes, the VSP helps people procure jobs, but in my view, a more important function is to give individuals the opportunity to access training that will enhance not only their employability, but also their income. Over the years, through grants and private donations, VSP has been able to offer certification trainings and other educational opportunities to our most vulnerable residents. However, initially we found that the completion rate in these programs was less than we had hoped...even when IW paid for the training. These individuals had too many barriers...like child care, transportation, and job responsibilities. Three years ago, again through private donations, IW was able to offer paid internships of \$15/hr. for every hour a person was in training. The results have been amazing! The completion rate soared to 94%.

Over the past 5 years, IW has helped more than 500 Montgomery County residents secure employment, collectively earning \$12M – money that has gone back into the county economy. On average, our VSP clients earn 8% above minimum wage.

The demand for this program is great – currently we have a four-month waiting list. An additional investment of \$430,000 from the Council could increase VSP's service capacity by 15% in FY26.

As I mentioned earlier, I am a small business owner. The way I see it is, this is actually a business decision. Sure, it's nice to help the vulnerable members of our community. And there are many worthy non-profits who can benefit from your resources. But I am asking that you look at this as an investment opportunity that can yield large financial returns to the county. It's a lot cheaper in the long-run to teach people to fish than to give them a fish to sustain them for only one day. We have the proof that our Vocational Services Program works. All we need is your investment to expand it to more residents.

Thank you.

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