



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony for FY26 Operating Budget

April 8, 2025

Good evening, Council President Stewart, Council Vice President Jawando, and members of the County Council. My name is Erika Conner and I am a member of the Montgomery County Community Action Board Executive Committee. On behalf of the board, thank you for the opportunity to share our board's priorities for FY26 with you today.

I will start by thanking the Council for your ongoing commitment to critical programs that support economically-disadvantaged residents, especially in these uncertain times. Thank you for supporting important programs and policy changes that address affordable housing, renters' rights, food security, child care, and so many other significant challenges.

The Community Action Agency, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services, is the County's federal, state, and locally-designated anti-poverty group. The agency is part of a nationwide network of nearly 1,000 Community Action Agencies that work in every part of the United States. These agencies have the shared goal of reducing poverty and helping people help themselves and each other.

In this unique role as the County's anti-poverty group, the Montgomery County Community Action Agency works to address the needs of our marginalized neighbors and helps move families towards the Self-Sufficiency Standard. We do this through the **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, which last year filed 2,246 tax returns** for residents with modest incomes, with a free tax impact of **\$8.6 million**. The agency operates the **Takoma-East Silver Spring (TESS) Community Action Center, a walk-in site in Long Branch that serves 200-300 residents each month, and the Navigation Unit, with Navigators based at organizations and**

agencies throughout the County who serve about 150 residents each month. Both of these programs connect residents with critical services, through the dedication of highly-trained, culturally and linguistically diverse staff members. Community Action also monitors contracts and grant agreements at 29 non-profit organizations throughout the County. Last but definitely not least, the County serves as the grantee for Head Start with Community Action providing grant oversight, working closely with MCPS to offer high-quality early care and education, along with wrap-around services for families that support student success. Last year, **Head Start families received 1,199 referrals for critical services, such as emergency/crisis intervention, English classes, mental health services, and parenting classes.**

Our role as the Community Action Board is to provide governance to the Community Action Agency and Head Start, but also to advocate for policies and programs that will help residents who are struggling. We take our role as the voice for the economically disadvantaged very seriously and that is why we want to speak with you tonight about the critical needs of our neighbors during these unprecedented times.

We are hearing about the fear and anxiety our undocumented neighbors are experiencing. Parents who are concerned for their safety and the safety of their children are scared to walk their children home from school. They are afraid to leave their homes and are afraid to wait at bus stops. Families are afraid to send their children to school because they fear being separated. The children, many of whom are citizens, are missing out on instruction, being exposed to toxic levels of anxiety, and are being kept from their daily routines, friends, and teachers.

Many of our neighbors are reluctant to seek services they need because of concerns about their immigration status and how their personal information might be used. For example, at a SNAP information session recently, every resident in attendance was reluctant to apply for food assistance due to concerns about what would happen to their information. Some food distribution programs have seen their numbers drop and some have moved food distribution

events inside so that participants feel safer picking up groceries. We have also heard from partner organizations that are receiving a record number of requests for “Know Your Rights” trainings.

We are asking the Council to do everything in your power to support these residents, through increased immigration legal services, mental health services, and other programs. Everyone deserves to feel safe here in Montgomery County and should feel comfortable seeking services and supports for which they are eligible.

Our board is also extremely concerned about the potential cuts to federal programs, including the Community Services Block Grant and Head Start funding, both of which directly support the Community Action Agency, along with Title I funding that supports the most vulnerable students. We are already aware of delays with CSBG funding and our agency is planning for various scenarios. Potential funding cuts and limitations on eligibility for housing programs, Social Security, and SNAP, would have devastating impacts on members of our community who are already struggling to make ends meet. We ask the Council to continue to support vulnerable members of our community as changes at the federal level occur.

It is important to note that all of the challenges discussed in this testimony are amplified in an area like Montgomery County, where the cost of living is so high and wages have not kept up. According to the Montgomery County Self-Sufficiency Standard, a household with two working adults, one preschooler, and one school-age child would need to earn \$122,943 annually to cover their basic necessities, over four times the federal poverty level.¹ Potential cuts to SNAP, Medicaid, TCA, and numerous other supports from the federal level will only exacerbate the challenges our neighbors already face in obtaining affordable housing, child care, food, healthcare, transportation, and other basic necessities. As needs increase, we ask the Council to continue to prioritize County programs that support residents with lower incomes.

¹https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/MDMontCo2023_SSS.pdf

For the last two years, our board has led efforts to advocate for full funding for the Working Families Income Supplement so that it will return to a 100% match of the Maryland EITC. This year, we will again submit a sign-on letter to you, which includes the support of numerous partners. We know that this is a significant request but as you will see in the letter, this investment is worth every penny and can go a long way toward helping our neighbors move one step closer to the Self-Sufficiency Standard.

Finally, we want to note that throughout this budget season, you have heard from numerous participants in our board's free advocacy training program for residents with modest incomes, the Community Advocacy Institute. There are 28 participants on track to graduate from the CAI this year – our largest cohort yet. Participants have testified in-person, including this evening, and have submitted written testimony to you. These are voices that you may not often hear at budget hearings. All of our CAI participants have worked hard to bring important community issues to your attention, including food insecurity, services for children with special needs, affordable housing, reducing barriers to services, and much more. We are excited for our upcoming CAI graduation next month and hope to see you all there.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Community Action Board's priorities with you. Our board stands ready to support the Council and your efforts to address the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors in the year ahead.