

Testimony of Ebony Cox

Montgomery County FY26 Budget Hearing – April 7, 2025

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Council,

My name is Ebony Cox, and I am a resident of The Laureate, located at 8005 Gramercy Blvd., Derwood, Maryland. I have had the privilege of living in this community for the past five months. As an African-American young woman dedicated to advocating for housing rights and equitable treatment, I actively participate in Housing Justice Montgomery.

I am writing to urge Montgomery County to allocate the essential \$50 million needed to ensure that the 4,723 households seeking rental assistance receive an average grant of \$10,581. This funding is critical for protecting the most vulnerable members of our community.

We also need \$9,475,427 to adequately cover the costs associated with sheltering and housing approximately 642 current clients and 200 new clients projected by 2026. This funding will ensure that all individuals receive the assistance they need to escape homelessness.

In addition, \$13,735,903 is vital to support both existing and new individuals who face the most severe challenges in achieving housing stability through the Permanent Supportive Housing program.

I also advocate for the expansion of moving assistance. An investment of \$2.4 million is necessary to provide families evicted by the sheriff's office with at least six months of storage. This support gives them a chance to recover and rebuild their lives.

I strongly recommend that Montgomery County allocate \$150,000 to fund critical retrofitting efforts through nonprofit organizations such as Rebuilding Together. These upgrades will help ensure that all residents can live with dignity and safety.

It is also imperative that we prioritize funding for Interfaith Works, specifically for staff training that addresses the challenges faced by residents with mental health issues in shelters. Staff should receive annual training — at least once or twice a year — on how to effectively manage behavioral issues with compassion rather than escalation. Moreover, all Interfaith Works employees

should possess certifications and skills to support residents with moderate to severe conditions. This will help build a safer and more supportive environment for people experiencing homelessness.

My own experience with housing instability began on September 29, 2019, when my apartment was declared uninhabitable due to a roof leak. The Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) instructed me to vacate my unit by the end of the month or be held responsible for rent. Shelters were full, so I had to live in my vehicle and motels until I found a new unit.

This made me feel devalued — especially as a participant in the Housing Choice Voucher program, which is meant to ensure residents can live with dignity. Unfortunately, the property management company did not maintain my unit according to HUD's standards, violating rules meant to protect tenants.

I had to take a job while living in a hotel just to survive, spending money that I could have used for my college tuition.

Stable, affordable housing is the cornerstone of a good life. It reduces mental, emotional, and physical stress. It allows parents to work and children to go to school. Without housing security, none of this is possible.

I benefited from emergency rental assistance, which allowed me to transition to my current stable home. This stability makes it possible for families to thrive and contribute meaningfully to their community.

I respectfully request that the Council vote in favor of allocating:

- \$50 million for emergency rental assistance
- \$9.5 million for rapid rehousing
- \$13.7 million for permanent supportive housing
- \$2.4 million for expanded moving assistance
- \$150,000 for accessibility retrofitting
- Additional funds for trauma-informed training and capacity-building at Interfaith Works

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,
Ebony Cox