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County Council Members
Montgomery County Council
100 Monroe Street
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear Council Members,

I submit this testimony as someone who wears many hats which provides multiple viewpoints: a parent and resident of Montgomery County, a former early childhood educator, an advocate for infant and early childhood mental health, an expert in infant/early childhood development on a systems-wide level, and, what I believe to be most important, as an independent entity.

The reason I believe that to be the most important is because in all of my work over the years, the level of clarity that comes from being an independent entity allows me to see more clearly and holistically.

In plain terms, I can see through the bull and can see what would provide an ultimate end goal focused on young children's best interests without being restrained by politics or limited in my capacity due to loyalties. While I respectfully work with many different people from many different organizations on a daily basis, I'm not here to make friends or worry about stepping on someone's toes; my main focus is what is best for young children and their families. Period.

One of the things this clarity has allowed me to see time and time again is how there is no one right answer. Everything needs to be examined in detail in order to find the true and best solution. **Nuance is necessary.**

What I notice with today's bill is that the nuance is being lost. By using the term "direct service" to be all encompassing, we are losing the nuance of the work that needs to be done. Children's Opportunity Alliance (COA) was designed, by the County, out of a need to focus on the long-term needs of our County's youngest residents and their families. While this type of work can seem high-level and all-encompassing, successful implementation comes down to the clear, nuanced, goal-based work COA can do.



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To be clear, I 100% agree with not duplicating services. In general, we rarely see “enough” money being set aside for early childhood services and needs, which means stretching every dollar is crucial. **However, there needs to be more nuanced clarity on what is duplication.** For instance, COA working directly with childcare providers to provide assistance on applying for grants is not a service Montgomery County currently provides, as far as I am aware.

While I do know our Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) is an amazing resource for childcare providers, I also know they are already stretched thin to meet their requirements due to a limited budget and staff. **I know this because I am also an independent contractor with the County who provides training for childcare providers.**

There are County employees whose job descriptions include providing training and technical assistance to providers, however, because the County employees are not able to meet the sheer number of providers’ needs, the County utilizes independent contractors, such as myself. **This is not considered a duplication of services, but rather, an expansion that compliments the work in order to meet the needs of providers.**

I believe that COA can provide a similar level of complementary services that is not in competition with anything the County is already doing, whether through the CCRC or Health and Human Services (HHS) or another area, and would not be considered a duplication of services. Expanding what our County can actually provide in a time-sensitive manner that aligns with agreed upon goals is what will produce substantial results.

In my work as an independent contractor with COA, I have spent time understanding the needs of childcare providers from 1:1 conversations and focus groups. Combined with my deep knowledge of early childhood systems and state/county-level requirements, I can see where both sides are working towards the same goal.

To give a plainly stated example, if an existing childcare provider would like to apply for Blueprint funding as a way to offer subsidized PreK programming to the families in their community, which is part of the community-based PreK expansion goal, they need a lot of assistance understanding what they are currently doing to what is required of the grant, long before they begin writing the formal application.

Some do not realize they need a different license than what they currently have in place; some do not realize the existing resources that can help providers to meet the higher education requirements. **For many, the idea of taking on more work without additional funding, time, or people, makes the goal of providing subsidized PreK seats unattainable, simply because of the barriers of entry.**



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From my understanding, the County does not provide this type of assistance. They have licensing specialists to help with what their currently implemented requirements are, they have coaching and technical assistance to help with existing implementation needs, but **there is no service or designated individual at the County level to support providers with the transition to being a PreK community provider. COA can fill this need.**

COA can help providers understand the grant requirements on the nuanced level of what this means for their business on a day-to-day basis. COA can provide the pathway support for what a provider is currently doing and what they will need to do in order to be eligible for grant-funding. At this point, when the provider is ready to implement these changes, the work goes back to the County to follow existing processes.

For instance, COA can help providers understand the different licensing requirements and how this will affect their existing space and staff on an individual basis, which can ensure any following paperwork or applications are at the highest level possible. By providing this support on the back-end, providers can have a stronger application which lowers their overall wait time until implementation, while also lessening the burden on the licensing specialists.

Anecdotally, I have heard from licensing specialists across the state over many years share that they are overwhelmed. This is not solely a Montgomery County issue and is not intended to point out our County's ineptities. **What it is a reality check on what licensing specialists are already being asked to do and how much more than can possibly take on without the County hiring more qualified staff.**

There are only so many specialists and so many hours in one day. As the needs of our County grow, as we see the PreK expansion model actually expanding with more community-based providers, **it is unfair and unrealistic to assume the existing specialists will be able to take on more responsibility.**

This is where a collaborative process can live between COA and the County. Taking away all of COA's ability to actually do any work, and only allowing them to collect data to report out their findings will prevent substantial changes from occurring. COA was created because these needs exist. It is essential that the nuances of their focus and work be taken into account rather than broadly removing all direct service.

I appreciate your time and focus in reading my extensive letter regarding this matter as it is impossible to reach the important nuances needed to comprehensively understand anymore succinctly. (Trust me, I tried; this is the shortened version of what I wanted to share.)



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Because this issue needs additional time and focus after your decision on Bill 23-25, I would like to offer any help I can give going forward. As I previously stated, my focus is always going to be what is best for young children and their families from an independent perspective. I want to see our County's goals achieved so that we are producing the best possible version of all people, especially our smallest residents.

I would be happy to speak with you about this or any other matter further, or to extend my services in any way I can be of help. Please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Amanda Holliday-Bembridge". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Amanda Holliday-Bembridge
"Doc Holliday"