The Arc
Montgomery County

Administration
Engagement • Finance • Human Resources & Staff Development • Information Technology • Quality Assurance • Respite Coordination
7362 Calhoun Place
Rockville, MD 20855

Adult Services
Inclusive Living
Community Living & Personal Supports
Employment & Day
Employment & Meaningful Day
7362 Calhoun Place
Rockville, MD 20855

Children & Youth Services
After All
4140 Wexford Drive
Kensington, MD 20895
KFICCC
10611 Tenbrook Drive
Silver Spring, MD 20901

Urban Thrift
10730 Connecticut Avenue
Kensington, MD 20895

301.984.5777

www.TheArcMontgomeryCounty.org

July 11, 1015

To the Members of the Montgomery County Council:

My name is Doreen Engel , and I am The Director of Children & Youth Services for The Arc Montgomery County. Our specialty is inclusive childcare and early childhood education for children with disabilities and who are medically fragile. I am writing in regard to the Expedited Bill 23-25, Early Care and Education Coordinating Entity.

I first heard about the Children's Opportunity Alliance through a community meeting in May of 2024. I was drawn to their mission of connecting our community to build an equitable, accessible, affordable, high-quality, and sustainable early childhood system that narrows disparities and puts all young children on a path to reach their greatest potential. Since then, I have volunteered for many activities and given input to COA, particularly enlarging the voice of parents who have children who are medically fragile or have disabilities who need childcare. They have provided me with valuable data and insights for grants that we are pursuing to increase childcare for medically fragile children and those with disabilities.

As an ECE Educator, my experience has been –

- There are a lot of opportunities available, such as the state PreK grant, but the systems and supports are not set up for us to be successful. Specifically see items in bold below.
- It is challenging to find and retain high quality ECE staff, we do the best we can with pay and benefits, but the margins are thin and if our center is not fully enrolled, it makes the business model even more challenging
- The support we have received through the Children's Opportunity Alliance has helped us to participate in the state PreK Blueprint grant. As changes are happening at the state level to build out a mixed delivery system, we were fearful of being left behind. *One key point is that prior to the summer of 2024, there were always additional funds for summer PreK programs. We always participated – this is comparable to ESY for young children with disabilities. Last year, there was no funding. This year, we are able to have students with us for the summer because of COA support. This is just one reason our students have such wonderful kindergarten readiness scores in kindergarten.*
- *The Blueprint forces us to enroll children in March for the coming fall, but does not confirm our receipt of the grant until mid-May at the earliest. Last year, we learned we had space for more children after our PreK grant application was submitted. With COA's assistance we were able to*

enroll four more children in our outstanding PreK program. Most of our students qualify under more than one of the three descriptors (income, language spoken at home, IEP) and thus do benefit from a high quality PreK environment before attending kindergarten.

I applaud you all as leaders for creating the Children's Opportunity Alliance and having the vision and understanding about the importance of early childhood. The first five years of life, and particularly the first three, are a critical stage in human development – laying the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health. Well-prepared and supported educators can provide intentional experiences that support children's learning and development, helping to build the critical cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills that can set them up for a lifetime of success.

The reality is nearly every family, regardless of income, employment status, race, gender, or geographic location needs support for their youngest children. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services considers child care affordable when it costs families no more than 7% of their household income – but most families in Montgomery County are paying between 25-30% of their income to pay for child care. That's more than many families' mortgage or rent payment. COA has set county-wide goals to increase access and affordability and the new legislative changes will limit COA's ability to work toward achieving those goals.

Over the past three years that COA has been in existence, we have had the following successes:

- Building a Common Agenda and setting county-wide goals related to ECE that include improving kindergarten readiness, increasing access to publicly subsidized seats from 11,000 to 18,000 over the next five years and working to better support the ECE workforce.
- Partnering with community-based organizations like LCAM and other associations to support outreach, mentoring and capacity building for Family Child Care programs.
- Greater transparency and inclusion of a variety of stakeholders (FCC, Centers, parents, nonprofit partners, business, and philanthropy) at the decision-making table (on the COA board) which ensures authentic voice and authority.
- Increasing awareness and supported family childcare and centers in accessing grant funding related to Blueprint PreK expansion in Montgomery County to build out a strong mixed-delivery system.
- Creation of a data dashboard and fiscal map on our website, so there is more public information about our ECE System.
- Advocated for systems change at the local and state level, including writing testimony and funding buses for educators to visit Annapolis and speak with state legislators.

We understand the legislation needs to be amended and we understand the concerns related to duplication, however these changes (related to not awarding or funding grants, not entering into contracts with childcare providers, not providing goods and services to child care providers and not funding seats), will limit innovation and supports that COA can provide to transform the ECE system.

These changes to COA's legislation are not in service of the youngest children or early care and education providers in Montgomery County. These changes will impact and change the mission and efforts of COA.

Childcare providers and parents have felt heard and included in this legislation when it was first created three years ago, but this feels like a targeted message to child care educators that early child care educators cannot be as connected to COA as they may want to be. COA intentionally listened to community before they began to lead and implement efforts to transform the ECE system in Montgomery County. We asked for help with the State Blueprint PreK application and COA helped make that possible for us.

Part of the mindset shift that COA has been working toward is one of inclusive leadership. This means that COA is trying to lead in a way that focuses on creating a work and partnership environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute. COA is actively promoting diversity and inclusion and ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate and succeed. These legislative changes feel very top down and not inclusive of the perspectives of the proximity experts of early childhood professionals and families. COA is trying to build a transformative mindset where multiple stakeholders are at the decision-making table – parents, early childhood educators, nonprofit partners and advocates, business, philanthropy and government partners and policy makers. We are requesting additional time to work with our various stakeholders to present amendments that are in alignment with what we all can agree upon.

It is critical that COA maintain a 360-degree view of the sector and pilot new ideas and fill the gaps that can be supported by philanthropy and an independent nonprofit that can be more nimble and quick compared to our government partners. This is what COA did with the $1 million dollars during the previous fiscal year.

- COA was created as an independent nonprofit, to coordinate efforts and be a multiplier – to amplify efforts already underway and work to address and identify gaps, which is what COA has done for the past three years.
- Equity needs to continue to be a top priority and guiding principle that influences this work and aligns with the County's racial equity and social justice goals.

Doreen Engel
Director of Children & Youth Services
Doreen.Engel@TheArcMoCo.org