

Good morning, Council President and Members of the County Council. My name is Julz Abate. I serve as the Respite Administrator for The Arc Montgomery County. I also serve on the Governor's Commission on Caregiving, as the Respite Ambassador for Montgomery County, and as a member of the Dementia Friendly Montgomery Committee.

My commitment to caregiving is both professional and deeply personal. I began my career as a direct support professional, working directly with children and adults with disabilities. I saw firsthand the joy, the challenges, and the incredible strength of families who were providing care around the clock with very little relief. Those early experiences shaped my understanding of what real support looks like and made one thing very clear: respite is not a luxury — it is essential.

The Arc Montgomery County has been fortunate to work in partnership with a county that truly understands and invests in the benefits of respite. Montgomery County has the most robust respite program in Maryland. While many counties rely almost exclusively on state funding to support caregivers, Montgomery County goes further. We are an Age Friendly County, a Dementia Friendly County, and a community committed to supporting residents with disabilities across the lifespan.

And the reason this matters so much right now is simple: the need is rising fast.

First, our population is aging, and people are living longer. In Montgomery County alone, older adults have grown to roughly 187,000 residents — about 18 percent of our population. That is a major demographic shift, and it means more families are supporting aging parents, spouses, and loved ones at home.

Second, longer life expectancy is a success story — but it also means more people are living long enough to experience complex health conditions, including dementia, that require sustained and often physically demanding caregiving, while allowing people to age in place in their own or family home.

Third, the approval process and waitlists for Medicaid-based waivers have become longer than in previous years, increasing the need for families to rely on respite services.”

There is an enormous amount of care happening in our communities, often while people are also working full-time jobs, raising children, or managing their own health. Many caregivers are performing medical and personal care tasks they were never trained for, while exhausted, overwhelmed, and afraid of what happens if they cannot keep going.

Respite supports caregiver health, reduces crisis situations, and helps people remain safely at home longer — which is what most families want.

This is why Montgomery County's commitment is so meaningful. It recognizes that respite is not an “extra.” It is a prevention. It is stability. It is one of the smartest investments we can make in a stronger care system.

But even with the County's support, demand is now outpacing available resources.

In FY24, 474 people were enrolled in respite.

In FY25, that number grew to 562.

And now, halfway through FY26, we are already at 595.

The need for respite is rising faster than our capacity to meet it.

So today, I am here to share this message clearly: our caregivers are asking for help — and what they are asking for is necessary to continue caring safely, consistently, and with dignity.

I want to share with you the reality of who our caregivers are.

One caregiver in our program is a 102-year-old man caring for his 94-year-old spouse, who is living with dementia and is blind. He is doing everything in his power to keep his wife safe, loved, and at home. But he is exhausted. He is frail. And he is carrying out a responsibility that would overwhelm even the strongest among us. Despite his own health challenges, he refuses to give up on caring for the woman he has loved for decades.

Another caregiver family we support is a set of parents raising four children — three of whom are triplets living with a genetic heart condition. Their days are filled with appointments, medications, constant monitoring, and the worry that never goes away. And in the middle of managing all that, they worry just as deeply about their typically developing child — whether he is getting the attention and emotional support he deserves. They are loving, devoted parents doing their best under extraordinary circumstances, but the load is heavy. Respite gives them the breathing room to care for all of their children, whether they are medically fragile or not.

Another caregiver family in our program is an 83-year-old couple caring for their 43-year-old son with autism. They moved to Maryland seven years ago in hopes of finding support for him, yet after all this time, he is still waiting to receive services. Caring for an adult child with a developmental disability at their age is physically demanding and emotionally exhausting. They live with daily fear about what will happen if one of them becomes ill or injured, and whether their son will have the support he needs when they no longer can. Respite is the only relief they have — the short breaks that allow them to keep going safely and with dignity.

These are only a few of the caregivers we support.

Their stories differ, but every one of them relies on respite for the well-deserved break that makes caregiving possible.

Considering these growing needs, I am asking the Council to increase funding for the Montgomery County Respite Care Program so we can expand capacity, and ensure families are not turned away in their moments of greatest vulnerability.

Caregivers cannot wait.

Older adults cannot wait.

Families raising medically fragile children cannot wait.

And people with disabilities who have spent years on state waitlists cannot wait.

Your continued investment in respite is not just a budget decision — it is a lifeline for hundreds of Montgomery County residents.

I urge you to strengthen that lifeline by expanding funding, increasing provider capacity, and ensuring that every caregiver who reaches out for help can receive it.

Thank you for your commitment — and thank you for supporting the caregivers who hold this county together every single day.

