



**Commission on People with Disabilities
Meeting Summary Minutes
February 10th, 2021**

****MEETING WAS HELD VIA ZOOM ****

Welcome and Approval of January 2021 Meeting Summary Minutes

Seth Morgan, Chair, convened the meeting. A motion was made to approve the January 2021 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the January 2021 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved as written. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cpwd.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) School Resource Officers (SROs) and Emotional & Safety Supports for Students – Officer Laurie Reyes, Special Operations Division, Autism/IDD (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities), Alzheimer’s and Dementia Outreach Unit, Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD); Dr. Christina Conolly, Director, Division of Psychological Services, MCPS; and Jasmine Williams, MCPS Student and Police Advisory Commission (PAC) Member

Officer Laurie Reyes has been a police officer for 23 years. The Autism/IDD, Alzheimer’s and Dementia Outreach program began in 2005, partly in response to the growing number of police calls involving missing residents who had autism/IDD, Alzheimer’s, and dementia. The program has continued to develop and today provides a “total approach” to issues that these residents and police encounter through education, outreach, follow-up, empowerment, and response. The program was recognized as a national model by the Obama administration. Officer Reyes noted that the Unit still handles 3 to 8 calls per week.

All MCPD recruits and officers receive training and education on ways to ensure positive, effective, and safe interactions between law enforcement and the Autism/IDD communities. The unit also works with caregivers and those who have Autism/IDD on ways to ensure that they are safe in the community. The unit regularly utilizes “self-advocates”, those who have autism or other intellectual and developmental disabilities, to assist with their presentations.

Throughout the year the Unit holds community events such as Spectacular Kids Night Out and Autism/IDD Night Out. They conduct presentations within and outside of the County. The goal of their outreach is to provide tools and resources which prepare individuals, caregivers, and the community effective ways to ensure a safe, meaningful community.

The Unit also follows-up with caregivers after we receive notice of a call for service involving someone from the autism/IDD, Alzheimer’s, or dementia community. Officer Reyes and Officer Tara Bond, Program Co-Coordinator, work with families to develop strategies and discuss how to have positive, safe, and effective interactions with law enforcement. They also work with other county and state services that may be able to help.

One of the main goals of the program is to provide a platform for those that don't always have a voice. They empower their officers, individuals, caregivers, and the community through education and outreach. They incorporate the concerns and questions of those they interact with to develop dynamic curriculums and presentations. They utilize "self-advocates", those who have Autism or other intellectual and developmental disabilities, to assist them in instruction of officers and community members. Officers are taught to never underestimate individuals who have disabilities and to provide accommodations.

Program Website: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/pol/howdol/autism-alzheimer-outreach.html>

Officer Reyes and Officer Bond partner with School Resource Officers or SROs. They recently presented a new curriculum to all SROs and to students with Autism and I/DD on how those students can have positive interactions with law enforcement and what MCPD is doing to ensure those interactions are positive. SROs also assist Officer Reyes in making sure no child slips through the cracks. For example, one SRO, who is an amputee, worked with a young man who has Autism that was having significant challenges that could have put him on a difficult path. The SRO worked with student and Officer Reyes to give him the support he needed.

Officer Reyes noted that when the program began in 2005, Autism was identified in 1 in 150 births. That statistic in Maryland is now as high in 1 in 59 births and the prevalence is increasing. MCPS has entire classrooms of elementary school students who are on the Autism spectrum and have other disabilities. Those students are only becoming older. Officer Reyes said SROs need to be in schools to be a voice for these students and to protect them. The partnership between MCPS and SROs is having an impact on students who have disabilities.

Dr. Christina Connolly, Director, Division of Psychological Services, Montgomery County Public Schools oversees the psychologists working in MCPS schools and is also part of the bilingual assessment team. She receives referrals for the Bilingual Assessment Services and provides consultation support in individual and group counseling. In her work, Dr. Connolly determines which students may need individual support and works with psychologists to provide that support. Each school is assigned a school psychologist. School psychologists provide support and counseling to students in both general education and special education. Many families who have students in special education have worked with a school psychologist to complete an assessment that found the student eligible for special education services. They may have also worked with a school psychologist to complete a functional behavior assessment (FBA) or behavior intervention plan (BIP) to support their behavioral needs.

Dr. Connolly also works with the SRO program and helps oversee the behavior threat assessment process which provides appropriate preventive and corrective measures to maintain a safe and secure school environment, to protect and support potential victims, and to provide assistance, as needed, to the individual being assessed. This process is mandated by the Maryland Safe to Learn Act which was signed into law by Governor Hogan in April 2018. Dr. Connolly works closely with the SRO program when students are referred to the behavior threat assessment team. She is responsible for conducting a two-day training for staff on the behavior threat assessment teams and has supported the SRO program by conducting trainings.

Dr. Connolly is Chairperson of the School Safety and Crisis Response Committee for the National Association of School Psychologists. She works with the National Association of School Resource Officers and other school safety groups across the country. These groups work collaboratively to provide training and information to SROs nationwide and reviews appropriate conduct, school climate, restorative practices, trauma informed practices, working with individuals with disabilities and more. Dr.

Connolly also assisted in the development of a required 40-hour training for SROs to complete prior to working within the schools. The statewide training curriculum includes information on trauma informed practices, behavioral threat assessment, bullying prevention, restorative practices, supporting students with disabilities. Dr. Connolly conducted a training with the SROs in August on suicide prevention and provided more information on trauma informed practices especially working with students of color and students who are living in poverty.

At this time MCPS has not issued an official position on SROs and all comments from Dr. Connolly are her own professional opinion. She stated that she can only speak to her own experiences working with SROs and her experiences growing up as a person of color in Baltimore City. She has worked with SROs on multiple cases for threat assessments and with students who have mental health concerns and finds them to be a significant asset in schools. MCPD SROs receive significant more training in comparison to other programs across the country. It is a model she has promoted to other law enforcement departments. Dr. Connolly acknowledges that it isn't perfect and said there are aspects that could be changed. This includes adjusting the SRO Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to provide continuous training and teaching more about restorative practices, trauma informed practices, mental health signs, and how to de-escalate behavior. The MOU should also be adjusted to review SRO evaluations, professional development, and discipline so the school district can provide information and support to MCPD. The MOU should also include that school administrators should not be involving SROs in the disciplining of students.

Dr. Connolly acknowledged the concerns of school arrests and school-to-prison pipeline. MCPS continues to do research on the effectiveness of SROs and on how to teach SROs how to understand the mental health needs of students to provide support instead of the potential for an arrest.

MCPS is implementing a new substance use diversion programs for students to divert them to restorative practices and restorative circles instead of discipline. They are also reviewing practices to ensure students who are engaged in discipline are not also arrested. While there is code within Maryland law requiring an arrest for certain situations, MCPS is working to provide support for students and working with MCPD to find alternatives to ensure that arrest is not the only option. It is Dr. Connolly's experience in working with the SROs that many want to support the student rather than arrest them. She has been in meetings where she and the SRO were actively trying to engage in supports or juvenile justice services for the student and the school administration wanted the student removed from the school. SROs also provide assistance for students who need an emergency petition for hospitalization for wanting to harm themselves or others. Dr. Connolly said she would prefer to have an SRO handle a situation within the school rather than a patrol officer who has little to no training on how to work with students, how to de-escalate student behaviors, or understanding students with disabilities. She noted that due to the pandemic and students receiving virtual instruction at home, some families have been contacting MCPD for assistance in managing their child's aggressive behaviors. The patrol officers do not know how to handle the situation and MCPD has been asking SROs to visit the home.

Dr. Connolly stated that removing SROs from the schools will not eliminate police in the schools. The administration will still call the police to help in certain situations and she would prefer to have a trained SRO handle the situation rather than a patrol officer who may not have that training or expertise.

Jasmine Williams, MCPS Student, Police Advisory Commission (PAC) Commissioner, recently graduated from Clarksburg High School and serves as a youth member on PAC and is Chair of the Policing in Schools Subcommittee. In her position on PAC, it was important to her to give as much weight as possible to student voices because it's the students of Montgomery County that are most

directly affected by this issue. They have met with a variety of student organizations including Young People for Progress, MoCo Students for Change, Students Toward Equitable Public Schools, and they've heard from over 30-led organizations and across the board students are calling for a removal of SROs and a reallocation of those funds towards mental health resources. She stated that they've seen data and heard anecdotal evidence that shows that Montgomery County has some racial inequalities that make police in schools, in her opinion so dangerous. Last year, 45% of arrests were black students despite them making up only 21% of the population. At the public hearing for Bill 46-20 - Police - School Resource Officers - Prohibited that took place this past Thursday, they heard stories from multiple students who believe that they have been racially profiled or intimidated by SROs in their schools. These are only the stories of those who are willing to come out and share their stories at a public hearing. She stated that we're at a pivotal point where we need to begin to address some of the flaws in our systems that lead to the disproportionate and amplified impact on black and brown communities especially regarding our young people. When students of color go to school it should be to an environment where they feel safe and comfortable to get their education. She stated that armed and uniformed officers can be a source of trauma for students especially for those who have experienced brutality at the hands of police or know someone who has or even just turned on the television and seen people who look like them murdered at the hands of police who aren't held accountable. She stated that students are going to school to learn, not to be criminalized. She stated that rather than police we should prioritize putting positive role models and people who are trained to help promote the well being of students and our schools.

Jasmine noted that Montgomery County falls below the recommended students to counselor ratio. She feels that the \$3,000,000 budget that funds the SRO program could much better serve our students if it were invested into mental health professionals and restorative justice programs as Bill 46-20 highlighted. The combination of data and real life experiences of students has led the Policing in Schools Subcommittee to realize the removal of SROs and reallocation of funds towards mental health resources is a necessary step in combatting the school to prison pipeline and addressing the lack of school psychologists and counselors in MCPS. She stated that Bill 46-20 is an important step towards equality in our schools and creating an environment where all our students feel safe. The floor was opened for questions.

Seth asked about data showing the number of students with disabilities being arrested disproportionate to students with no disabilities. He also asked why there seemed to be so many issues with the Montgomery County SRO program even with it being considered a model for SRO programs found across the nation.

Dr. Connolly said the data does show that student arrests are disproportionate to students of colors and students with disabilities. It is especially disproportionate for students of color who are black and brown and for students with disabilities who are black and brown and who are receiving support due to having an emotional disability. She noted that there are substance use issues within all MCPS high schools. There has been a significant amount of arrests due to drug offenses. The outcome of those students who have been cited for substance use depends on whether the family can afford an attorney to help avoid arrest.

Dr. Connolly worked with the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement to develop a substance use resiliency prevention program as a way of diverting students away from arrests and discipline and into receiving support. This program was developed in collaboration with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services. That program is scheduled to be implemented this month. Dr. Connolly also acknowledged there are issues of racism and discrimination. MCPS is invested

in their anti-bias and anti-racism audit that is currently being conducted and practices will be reviewed to address these concerns. She noted that some SROs have felt pressure to arrest a student from school administration. MCPS will also be working with and providing support to school administration and the SROs in developing alternatives to arrest and discipline.

Officer Reyes reported there were 26 physical arrests in 2019 and 96% of those arrests were requested from MCPS staff. Proactive involvement with law enforcement is very minimal with one or two arrests last year. The rest of the arrests were charged via citation or adjudicated another way. SROs will refer students with disabilities who are charged to Officer Reyes who will work with the family and provide supports to keep that individual from future mistakes that could have harsher consequences.

Dr. Connolly reported that the national school psychology ratio is 1 psychologist to 500 students. The current MCPS ratio is 1 psychologist to 1500 students. During a normal school year, that ratio is 1 psychologist to 1700 students. MCPS absolutely needs more mental health staff especially when supporting preventative services. MCPS now has an office that focuses specifically on mental health, social/emotional needs, discipline, and working with students with behaviors. The MCPS Be Well 365 initiative provides students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities in six essential areas of physical, social, and psychological development that support academic growth and lifelong personal and career success.

Dr. Connolly noted that there will be instances in schools that will require a police presence such as issues of rape or sexual assault or if someone brings a weapon on campus. SROs know the students, the families, and the staff. A strong school administration helps to bridge the gap and integrate the services of SROs so they are not seen as a punishment but as supportive. She also noted that SROs are receiving training on the updated DARE curriculum. Dr. Connolly personally fears having patrol officers respond to situations within the schools as they do not have the same level of training as SROs. She agrees that 40-hours of training is not enough and continuous training is needed and should be included in the MOJ. She also said research and data should be collected and reviewed annually to eliminate the disproportionate rates of arrests and discipline.

Officer Reyes said all officers receive a significant amount of training on mental health. The MCPD Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) are trained specifically to handle calls on mental health and critical instances. SROs do have more indepth training as it relates to students and mental health.

Neal Carter, Commissioner, has concerns that the SRO program does not train on all types of disabilities. He acknowledged the school-to-prison pipeline issues. He also has concerns that this Commission will not be able to come to a consensus and take a position on this topic. Seth said this presentation is more for educational purposes and he does not foresee the Commission taking a position. He encouraged Commissioners who feel strongly about this issue to contact the County Council as a private citizen.

Avner Shapiro, Commissioner, has a son who has Autism and who might have difficulties interacting with a police officer. His son can become anxious and sometimes act out when stressed which could be misread by a police officer. Avner does not want students like his son to unnecessarily encounter police officers and for them to work a psychologist or a therapist first. He is concerned that schools may turn too quickly to SROs and would prefer that a therapist become involved first for behavioral issues. He asked if SROs could potentially be on call for situations instead of being in the schools daily. Officer Reyes said she is in classrooms quite often and makes presentations before all cognitive levels so she may have interacted with Avner's son already. The goal is to have positive interactions with the students

when they are not in crisis in order to establish that familiarity with the officer. Officer Reyes and Tara Bond started a new presentation titled “Looking Out for the Underdog” to teach the entire student body about looking out for people who may look or act different from themselves and to teach them empowerment. Officer Reyes also noted that while SROs receive extra training on Autism and I/DD, patrol officers are also trained and handle 50 to 80 calls per month for the Autism and I/DD community for all levels of situations from the mundane to the very serious with positive, safe and effective outcomes.

Seth asked what changes the presenters would suggest for improving the current system. Dr. Connolly said there is a definite need for more school psychologists, counselors, and social workers. Students with mental health and behavioral concerns should be able to seek free treatment and support in the schools. Those staff could help address issues in the school climate as well as implementing preventative ideas to deter discipline and substance use. Dr. Connolly reported 50% of students have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

Day Al-Mohamed, Commissioner, said because this issue impacts so many youths with disabilities who are also youth of color the Commission should take action. The statistics show that younger individuals with disabilities who are of color tend to be at higher risk of having negative interactions with the police. She agreed it is a complicated issue with a variety of different viewpoints and that no matter what happens with Bill 46-20 retaining the status quo is not helping either.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, said it is her understanding that some school systems in other states apply for medical assistance to help pay for the psychologists. She asked if MCPS could look into this to increase funding for more mental health services. Dr. Connolly said it is a state issue and the Maryland Department of Health is denying school psychologists from being able to apply for Medicaid funding. She is appointed by Lieutenant Governor to be a member of the Youth and Family Subcommittee and has presented before the Commission about this issue. The Subcommittee has presented before the Maryland School Psychologist Association to try and pass legislation. Dr. Connolly has been campaigning for several years at the state level and working with national associations to work on legislation. Federally the schools can apply for Medicaid funding, but Maryland would need to change their legislation to enable this ruling. Maryland schools could receive millions of dollars of Medicaid funding to provide additional mental health support. A legislator from Harford County may be drafting legislation to be introduced during this year’s session. Dr. Connolly would greatly appreciate this Commission’s help on this issue. Betsy said this Commission can request that the County’s Office of Intergovernmental Relations support that the Commission to write a letter of support for legislation. Individuals are also encouraged to write their state elected officials. Beth Shuman, Senior Legislative Aide, Councilmember Gabe Albornoz, said her office will look into this issue as well.

Karen Goss, Public, noted that Northern Virginia school systems have a surplus of funds due to schools not being in session and those funds are being reallocated to increase resources in the schools to specifically assist students with disabilities. She asked if this approach could also be used by MCPS.

Avner asked if there have been situations where a student with behavioral issues was referred too quickly to police when there should have been an opportunity for a psychologist or therapist to intervene first. Dr. Connolly said in her previous district that school security and SROs were first called in for situations where a student was having a behavioral issue. She has significantly increased the amount of training security receives so they can help to de-escalate situations instead of quickly jumping to the need to arrest. Having a therapist, psychologist or counselor available would be helpful to the situation as well but unfortunately due to the logistics of the school and their schedules they most likely would not

be able to immediately respond to a situation. School psychologists know the students and the families, they work with behavior intervention plans and know how to de-escalate situations, they train paraprofessionals, teachers, and security, and work with the SROs. That is why the need for more mental health staff is so great as they help prevent situations from occurring in the first place. The issues and concerns need to be looked at from a whole school approach because any staff person could be called in to provide support. Dr. Connolly is working with Ed Clark on providing additional training and support to security to help create a safe and supportive school climate. She also noted that there is a national shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists so even with additional funding there wouldn't be enough available staff to hire.

Betsy said in her experience people too often do not seek out help and if a child is feeling threatened or depressed they probably would not seek out a school psychologist. She asked how many students refer themselves for counseling. Dr. Connolly said not as many as they would like. MCPS has a workgroup currently reviewing the mental health screening process. They also train as many staff as possible to recognize the signs of mental health concerns. Students are typically referred due to externalized behaviors, such as yelling and fighting. Staff are being trained on how to identify students with internalized issues including depression and anxiety. It is also important that staff treat the mental health issue and not bring disability or race into it. Dr. Connolly said the school-to-prison pipeline is real and law enforcement need to have a better understanding of how racism and discrimination impacts that pipeline. There need to be honest conversations around these issues in order to change the system and provide better support and services to students.

Trish Gallalee, Vice-Chair, asked about whether school administration is being overly aggressive and assertive in requesting an SRO be involved in a situation. Dr. Connolly recognizes this is an issue and concern. They are looking at how to better train administrators. The Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement has a restorative justice unit that works with the equity office to train on anti-bias and anti-racism. Dr. Connolly added that MCPS has a court room liaison as well as people personnel workers (PPWs) that provide support for students who are involved with the juvenile justice system and support to their families. Simone Geness, Transition Services Unit, MCPS, said even though training is provided it is how that individual chooses to operate within that construct. There are certain offenses that require a police officer to intervene as stated within the MOU between MCPS and MCPD. Systematic and systemic racism is not germane to MCPS and is something that we must grapple with as a country. Behaviors will not change until viewpoints are changed and individuals are held accountable. MCPS has been addressing equity issues and changing their hiring practices. Whether SROs are removed or not it is not going to change the issues with racial inequality or racial bias.

Chair and Vice-Chair Report

Seth announced a Steering Committee meeting will be held next Wednesday, February 17 from 5pm to 6pm. The Committee will discuss InterACC/DDs request for an increase in general assistance funding, the need for more supervisors within the County's Community support network. and a continuation of tonight's discussion. Betsy will send out an agenda with Zoom link tomorrow.

Ex-Officio Member Reports

Tabled due to time.

Announcements

Tabled due to time.

Meeting adjourned – 7:35pm

**Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities
March 2021 Meeting and Events Calendar**

Developmental Disability Advisory Committee – Monday, March 8th

****PLEASE NOTE NEW START TIME****

3:30pm to 5pm to be held via Zoom – link to be announced

Full Commission Meeting – Wednesday, March 10th

6pm to 7:30pm to be held via Zoom – link to be announced

Submitted by: Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I
Betsy Tolbert Luecking, Community Outreach Manager

