



Mental Health Advisory Committee's Top Priorities FY-22

The Montgomery County Mental Health Advisory Committee (MHAC) is committed to working collaboratively with our community partners to monitor, advise, and advocate for a comprehensive mental health system of care for Montgomery County residents. We appreciate the support of County Executive Marc Elrich and the County Council, especially the HHS committee which includes Councilmen Alborno, Glass, and Rice, for funding for so many critical programs and services.

The following are MHAC's top priorities for FY-22 for which two subcommittees will be organized:

1. *Improve the County's Crisis Services*: The MHAC will continue its focus to improve the crisis response system in Montgomery County.

The MHAC thanks the County Executive and County Council for increased funding it has provided for the county's mobile crisis services in the past two years. In that time, the county has provided funding to increase the number of mobile crisis teams that operate throughout the county from one team to six teams operating 24/7. Most recently, the county's FY 2022 budget has added more than \$600 thousand in new funding to expand the number of mobile crisis teams in the county. The county is also working to improve the efficiency of the county's mobile crisis teams, through operational changes and by restructuring the teams. Operationally, the county has been working to develop new policies governing how the county's mobile crisis teams are deployed, including by eliminating the requirement that the teams wait until police officers are present before responding to a crisis when it is safe to do so and by evaluating the types of data that we collect when the teams respond to calls. And we fully support the county's plans to restructure the mobile crisis teams, which currently consist of two licensed therapists, to include one licensed therapist and one peer support specialist.

In the coming year, the Crisis Services Subcommittee plans to continue to monitor the hiring for these new positions and implementation of these new policies. In particular, we urge the county to prioritize hiring providers and peer support specialists with diverse cultural backgrounds that reflect the communities in which they will be serving, and in particular we urge the county to prioritize bilingual and multilingual candidates.

The Crisis Services Subcommittee also urges the County Executive and County Council to direct funding to build a state-of-the-art **Restoration Center**, a facility that provides 24/7 urgent mental health care, crisis stabilization, referral, and treatment services, among other things. This facility has been established in other jurisdictions as a best practice in responding to mental health and other crises and providing an alternative to the Emergency Department for individuals without emergent medical needs. We believe that such a center would ultimately be a cost-saving measure for the county by reducing the need for more costly interventions, including reducing the burden on police, fire and rescue, emergency departments, jails, and prisons.

In addition, we recommend the County Executive and County Council promote and support Mobile Response and Stabilization Services (MRSS), a national best practice to address crises, maintain children in a family-setting in the community, and reduce utilization of emergency departments, inpatient hospitals, and residential treatment. MRSS is critically needed to prevent future crises; reduce involvement with law enforcement, particularly for children and youth who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; provide care in the least restrictive environment appropriate to clinical needs; and maintain children safely at home and in the

community. In 2013, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service (CMS) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) endorsed Mobile Response and Stabilization Services as an essential service for consideration within a children's behavioral health continuum.

<https://www.medicaid.gov/sites/default/files/federal-policy-guidance/downloads/CIB-05-07-2013.pdf> In September 2018, the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors acknowledged Mobile Response and Stabilization Services as a core element within a children's crisis continuum of care. https://nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/TACPaper8_ChildrensCrisisContinuumofCare_508C.pdf.

We also recommend the County Executive and County Council fund the other recommended improvements highlighted in the Crisis Now Grant Proposal, including **technological improvements and expansion of the Crisis Center's hotline** and the **Montgomery County Hotline operated by EveryMind, studying how 911 calls can be directed to mobile crisis, and working with the state to plan for the roll out of 988**. It is our belief that the funding and integration of a single call line for behavioral health calls, such as 988, is critical to getting individuals in crisis the response needed in a timely fashion by reducing the need for multiple transfers before someone speaks to a behavioral health professional. Any expansion of crisis response services will have only a limited effect if it is not accompanied by robust **follow-up care** and **case management** to ensure people are linked with ongoing mental health services and other supports that will address the needs that led to them experiencing a crisis in the first place.

2. *Environmental Impacts on Mental Health and Resilience*

As the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has made clear, continued access to quality mental health services during a state of emergency is critically important. Yet, ensuring access to these services during a state of emergency requires substantial planning and resources. The growing threat of climate change is likely to present its own unique challenges to ensure county residents have access to mental health services. Accordingly, we recommend the county take steps to include a mental-health component to its plans to address climate change.

On December 5, 2017, Montgomery County was the first county in the country to adopt a **climate emergency** resolution. This affirmed the county's understanding and commitment to the threat of global warming. Since then, County Executive Marc Elrich set carbon reduction goals of 80% by 2027 and 100% by 2035. The County also established five work groups to examine how best to meet these goals and invested in a consultant to develop the Climate Action Plan (CAP). The resulting plan has adopted a **health frame** that highlights health co-benefits of a green economy and other mitigation and adaptation efforts. This frame gives our community the motivation to act now and feel the benefits now and well into the future. The health frame should also highlight the related mental health co-benefits of the proposed policy changes.

Similarly, while many agencies have been involved in this planning process, it has not included a representative for Behavioral Health and Crisis Services. Yet, ensuring adequate funding for and access to quality mental health services, which will promote residents' health, wellbeing, and resilience, should be included as a critical element of any climate change response plan.

Priority Focus Areas

- Recommend the inclusion of a mental-health representative to the CAP and Department of Environmental Protection work group and other related meetings, to report back to MHAC, ensuring mental health services are adequately represented in county climate change plans.
- Recommend that the county expand the health frame to include mental health and request the development of research-based recommendations related to crisis situations and ways to build community resilience before, during, and after crisis events as part of our preparedness efforts.
- MHAC will actively partner with environmental groups and other committees working to address climate change to raise awareness of the growing body of research linking climate change to mental health concerns.

- Partner with Montgomery County Public Schools to ensure mental health is included in climate change, environment, and preparedness activities.
- Recommend inclusion of the MHAC in county-sponsored climate change and emergency preparedness events to educate the public more broadly.

Other Priority Areas: Investigation, Participation, and Support

- *Suicide Prevention:* The MHAC continue to participate in the countywide Suicide Prevention coalition's weekly suicide prevention discussions and activities. That coalition includes representatives from several of the county's Boards, Commissions, and Committees, county agencies, nonprofit organizations, providers, and people with lived experience with mental illness. MHAC members attend these calls and participate on all three subcommittees: youth, adults, and aging adults. MHAC members participating in this work will continue to report back to the MHAC on the coalition's activities and will facilitate any combined efforts between the MHAC and coalition.
- *Residential Services:* The MHAC will research and investigate Montgomery County residential services to determine accessibility, availability, and other factors that may impact those in need of residential care.