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Testimony of Ralph D. Belk, LICSW, LCSW-C

Deputy Executive Director

National Center for Children and Families (NCCF)

Montgomery County Interagency Commission on Homelessness

Public Hearing

Tuesday, April 23, 2019

3 PM

Rockville Memorial Library

21 Maryland Avenue, Rockville, Maryland 20850

www.nccf-cares.org

1438 Rhode Island Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20018

6301 Greentree Road, Bethesda, Maryland 20817

Good afternoon ICH Commissioners. My name is Ralph Belk, and I serve as the Deputy Executive Director with the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF), headquartered in Bethesda, Maryland. Thank you for this opportunity to share testimony as it relates to funding priorities to meet the needs of those experiencing homelessness in our County.

For nearly four decades, NCCF has served homeless children, youth, and families in Montgomery County with emergency family shelter, transitional, permanent, and affordable housing programs. NCCF is a proven regional leader in the delivery of innovative and comprehensive housing solutions, operating nine (9) programs that provide coordinated, effective, and targeted services to homeless children, youth and families facing extreme poverty.

NCCF celebrates with the County in achieving an end to chronic and veteran homelessness. We are pleased to note that the County has finally begun to pivot its attention to family and youth homelessness, populations that I encounter every day in my work. NCCF wants to ensure that both family and youth homelessness is rare, brief, and one-time only in Montgomery County. As funding priorities are being discussed, NCCF urges the ICH to prioritize funding for both populations.

NCCF has two recommendations:

1. We recommend that current HUD funded programs serving families be maintained or even enhanced. It is crucial that we, as a community, examine the intersection of race and poverty if we want to address family homelessness in Montgomery County. It is imperative for you to prioritize strategic tactics that advance racial and gender equity across all systems, including health care, child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, law enforcement, and workforce development. A flat or standard approach to homeless families will do irreparable damage to family units already more susceptible to entering public systems because they are disproportionately poor and African American. Families require an individualized, culturally specific, and trauma informed interventions in order to succeed.
2. We recommend that the ICH effectively prioritize and fund short term and subsidized, affordable housing for homeless youth in its continuum of care. Just yesterday, NCCF released its Youth REACH MD 2018: Housing Needs of Youth in Montgomery County, MD report entitled, HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: A Focus on Homeless Youth. The study revealed that at least 178 youth in our community lack a safe, fixed, residence and battle tremendous barriers to housing stability. These unaccompanied youth in are our community, suffering the dire consequences of being young, alone, and homeless without the choices of their more privileged peers with comprehensive supports and options. The majority of youth were between the ages 18-24, and disproportionately of color 87%, 80% male, underemployed, undereducated, and disconnected from the limited resources that currently exist in our community.

More than 50% of the youth had no idea how long they could stay where they slept the night before the survey. When youth encounter persistent housing instability, their lives are upended, their potential is thwarted and their experiences with homelessness are anything but "rare, brief, and non-reoccurring." Their needs require a tangible, demonstrated, commitment, and the allocation of adequate funding to provide stable housing that aligns with the federal 2020 goal of ending youth homelessness.

Again, thank you for this time and please take time to read our Youth REACH report and consider all of the recommendations outlined. I have additional copies to share.