



## OFFICE OF RACIAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Marc Elrich  
County Executive

Tiffany Ward  
Director and Chief Equity Officer

### MEMORANDUM

April 2, 2024

To: Jennifer Bryant, Director  
Office of Management and Budget

From: Tiffany Ward, Director  
Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice

Re: Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) Supplemental Appropriation (SA) #24-40  
IAFF COVID Booster Vaccinations (\$134,190)

- I. **FINDING:** The Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice (ORESJ) is unable to determine the effect that Supplemental Appropriation #24-40 *IAFF COVID Booster Vaccinations* will have on advancing racial equity and social justice in the County. Unlike previous COVID-19 vaccination booster programs offered by the County, this funding does not center Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), but rather Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service (MCFRS) career personnel. Additionally, the booster program is voluntary, with no mandate requiring vaccination against COVID-19 for personnel. Absent updated data showing vaccination rates and testing amongst fire personnel, ORESJ cannot determine if this supplemental funding improves outcomes for BIPOC career personnel, other County employees, or vulnerable residents encountering unvaccinated MCFRS personnel.
- II. **BACKGROUND:** The purpose of SA #24-40 is to fund the operating costs related to administering COVID-19 booster vaccinations to MCFRS career personnel. The supplemental appropriation request indicates that booster administration is required by the County's collective bargaining agreement with the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), Local 1664.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agreement Between Montgomery County Career Fire Fighters Association, International Association of Fire Fighters, Local 1664, AFL-CIO and Montgomery County Government/Montgomery County. Article 22.L - Prevailing Rights. COVID-19 vaccination and booster shots, Hepatitis Vaccine Shots and annual flu shots at no cost to the employee if requested by the employee. Each year, employees will be informed, in writing, of the availability of flu shots at least sixty (60) days

The Centers for Disease Control list the following benefits of getting vaccinated against COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

- **Prevents serious illness:** COVID-19 vaccines available in the United States are safe and effective at protecting people from getting seriously ill, being hospitalized, and dying.
- **A safer way to build protection:** Getting a COVID-19 vaccine is a safer, more reliable way to build protection than getting sick with COVID-19.
- **Offers added protection:** COVID-19 vaccines can offer added protection to people who had COVID-19, including protection against being hospitalized from a new infection.

The booster program will be available to IAFF Local 1664 bargaining unit members at no personal cost. COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters are covered for all County employees enrolled in County health insurance plans. Additionally, adults 18 years and older without health insurance can get free COVID-19 vaccines through the Bridge Access Program.<sup>3</sup>

III. **ANALYSIS:** ORESJ has previously documented in numerous REIAs national and local racial disparities related to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the impact of vaccinations and boosters. These REIAs also provide analysis of policies and practices for addressing and preventing disparate outcomes in the future, including the County's Framework for Equitable Access to the COVID-19 Vaccination.<sup>4</sup> Our complete analysis can be found in the following REIAs.

- #21-528 COVID FEMA Emergency Protective Measures Grant. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ore/Resources/Files/21-528.pdf>
- #21-529 COVID Mass Vaccination CARES Grant. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ore/Resources/Files/21-529.pdf>
- #22-50 CARES Grant. Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ore/Resources/Files/22-50.pdf>
- #23-81 – FY23 Operating Budget, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service General Personnel and Operating Costs <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ore/Resources/Files/23-91.pdf>

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prior to their availability, and at that time employees will be requested to respond, by email or in writing, within 21 days of such notification if they wish to receive a flu shot. Any employee who indicates that he/she wishes to receive a flu shot and who subsequently declines to receive the shot may be required to reimburse the Employer for the cost of the dosage up to a maximum of ten dollars (\$10.00). The County shall have no obligation to provide flu shots to bargaining unit employees who do not respond to this notice. Available at:

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLR/Resources/Files/IAFFCBA2022-2024-FINALPDF2023.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/vaccine-benefits.html>

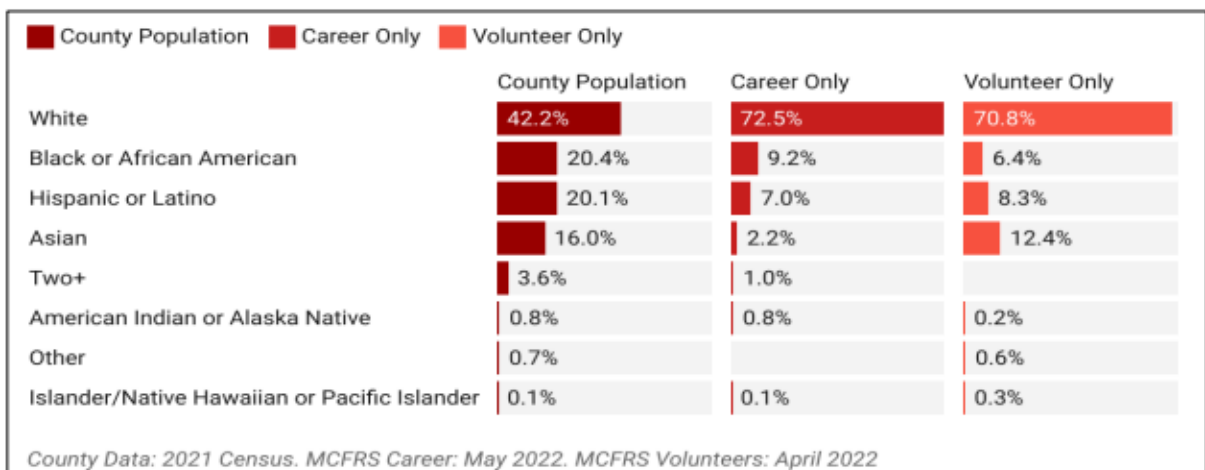
<sup>3</sup> CDC's Bridge Access Program. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/bridge/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> Montgomery County Government. Framework for Equitable Access to COVID-19 Vaccination. 2021. Available at:

<https://montgomerycountymd.gov/covid19/Resources/Files/vaccine/mc-vaccine-equity-framework.pdf>

Based on demographic data included in the 2020 National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) equity assessment of MCFRS, an underrepresentation of people of color exists among fire department personnel. While the data is not disaggregated by race, more recent figures presented in the CountyStat MCFRS Performance Measures show the percentage of non-white personnel (not including volunteers) fell from 29% in 2021 to 22% in 2023.<sup>5</sup> The majority of the COVID-19 booster funding will likely benefit union-represented employees who are white, which is unlikely to contribute to a reduction in racial disparities in health outcomes for County personnel.

*Figure 19. Race and Ethnicity (2020) - Montgomery County vs MCFRS workforce*



Source: National Academy of Public Administration

The County considered legislation, Expedited Bill 34-21 - Personnel and Human Resources – COVID-19 Vaccination Required, which would have mandated COVID-19 vaccination for all County employees, with a few exceptions. While the legislation expired in March 2023 and was not enacted, the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) completed a Racial Equity and Social Justice Impact Statement (RESJIS) on Bill 34-21.<sup>6</sup> OLO found that Expedited Bill 34-21 should narrow public health related racial and ethnic inequities by increasing the County’s COVID-19 vaccination rate, which would exceed the potential public service costs on racial equity and social justice should employees not comply with the mandate.

The RESJIS discussed the disproportionate harm caused by COVID-19 to BIPOC, especially Black and Latinx residents. The RESJIS also discussed how the legislation could enhance public health outcomes for Black and Latinx residents in the short- and long-term by reducing rates of infection, hospitalization, and death. The CDC identified workplace vaccination programs as an effective strategy to help protect workers and the public they

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/countystat/mcfrs.html>

<sup>6</sup> Available at: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/OLO/Resources/Files/resjis/2021/RESJ-EBill34-21.pdf>

serve from the harmful impacts of COVID-19, especially since workplace environments can trigger outbreaks that could negatively impact the public health of residents.<sup>7</sup>

As of January 24, 2022, 77% of all MCFRS employees, compared to 86% of employees across all County departments, were reported as being fully vaccinated.<sup>8</sup> Vaccinations were tracked using the Employee COVID-19 Vaccination Disclosure System. The current status of the Disclosure System's use and ability to track fully vaccinated plus boosted employees are unclear. The IAFF COVID Booster program assumes an 80% "take rate".<sup>9</sup> According to County staff, the national average for participation in vaccination programs is a 15-30% take rates for all employees, with MCFRS participating at higher than average rates. However, that rate is well below the 80% assumed in this supplemental funding request.

Given that cost has already been removed as a barrier through existing programs providing vaccines free of charge, more information is needed to determine whether allocating resources specifically toward increasing vaccination rates among this workforce represents the most equitable approach to improving public health outcomes for vulnerable communities.

cc: Gary Cooper, Interim Chief, Fire and Rescue Services  
Ken Hartman, Director, Strategic Partnerships, Office of the County Executive

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<sup>7</sup> IBID.

<sup>8</sup> Available at: [https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/ccllims/DownloadFilePage?FileName=2725\\_1\\_19992\\_Bill\\_34-21E\\_CommitteeAddendum\\_20220127.pdf](https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/ccllims/DownloadFilePage?FileName=2725_1_19992_Bill_34-21E_CommitteeAddendum_20220127.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> HR Executive defines take rate as the percentage of eligible employees participating in the program. Understanding the program take rate helps organizations allocate resources. Available at: <https://hrexecutive.com/10-key-workforce-education-metrics-to-track-in-2024/>.