

Testimony on the FY2023 Montgomery County Budget

My name is Ilhan Cagri. I am testifying on behalf of the Muslim Voices Coalition with respect to the FY2023 Montgomery County Budget.

I would like to concentrate my testimony on four areas:

First, our county does not need the large **Community Resources Bureau** (CRB) proposed for MCPD. This department is intended to fix a problem that has not been adequately articulated. The community events envisioned by the CRD should not be run by the police. They belong in the Recreation Department and in other departments that provide community enrichment.

Second, we definitely do **not** need armed police in the schools. Studies firmly show that despite anecdotal positive stories about SROs, the system of police in schools cannot avoid being discriminatory. It feeds the school-to-prison pipeline. It does not prevent gun violence. What our students need is more mental health supports. They are suffering from the trauma caused by the Covid pandemic on top of other mental health issues affecting young people. In addition, nineteen of our high schools lack a Wellness Center. We support the Council's decision to expand Wellness Centers, but they must be in every high school and adequately staffed to meet the mental health needs of the student population. In addition, funding must be provided for mental health supports in every lower school as well.

Third, our county needs full **Mobile Crisis Outreach Team** (MCOT) Coverage. The County must reduce dependence on police as first responders to mental health crises. Police cannot be trained sufficiently to handle these kinds of incidences. It is abundantly clear that using police to handle mental health crises will continue to put at risk the lives and safety of people experiencing mental health crises. The County's behavioral health first-responder plans are inadequate, even with planned improvements. Currently, 3 teams operate during weekdays, and only 1 team operates the evening and weekend shifts. With this inadequate coverage, County-wide crisis response cannot happen reliably or quickly. Even as the County brings on peer support staff, it appears just 5-6 teams will be available to cover the entire County and only during the busiest times of the day. Clearly, this expansion falls short of the total, comprehensive need. Without a robust behavioral health first-response system, people in crisis will be treated as criminals based on laws against trespassing or disorderly conduct that are discriminatory by design.

Finally, the County must do better in meeting the needs of its refugees. If small towns in Poland can be organized to handle the influx of thousands of refugees from Ukraine, it is unacceptable that Montgomery County cannot do better in helping the total of 850 Afghan refugees that will be settled here.

We need a **comprehensive refugee resettlement agency** to coordinate the efforts of individuals and volunteer agencies and to provide assistance for basic living. There are Afghan refugees going hungry. The rental assistance being provided by the NGOs will soon run out. These people will be facing a serious crisis within a few months. Many of them have young children.

The Gilchrist Center is not a full service agency – nor can it meet the need. We must ensure that our refugee population can be integrated into our society by providing them the means to pay for housing and food.

As background, I might mention that my children and I arrived here as refugees from Afghanistan in 1983. My children, Zeki, Haroon, Yahya and Idris Mokhtarzada, have grown to become model residents of Montgomery County, not only in bringing jobs and prestige to the county but also in the amount of social service work they contribute to. We were honored that County Executive Marc Elrich mentioned them in his State of the County address on April 14, 2022. All this to say that a small investment up front in helping these new refugees will ensure a larger return down the road.

Thank you.

Ilhan Cagri, Ph.D.