

July 14, 2020

The Honorable Sidney Katz
President
Montgomery County Council
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue

Re: Special Appropriation to Support Primary Health Care and Dental Providers

Dear Council President Katz and Councilmembers:

The Montgomery Cares Advisory Board, Health Centers Leadership Council, and Primary Care Coalition are pleased to write this letter of support and appreciation for the \$3 million special appropriation introduced to support primary health care and dental providers as we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Never before has the importance of a strong, vibrant health care sector been more apparent. Primary care is the backbone of our health system providing essential access to community-based treatment and disease management for residents and helping to reduce avoidable use of hospital emergency departments at a time when hospitals need to focus their resources on COVID-19 response.

While many health care providers continue to serve patients, some have had to suspend operations as visit rates dropped during the early months of the outbreak. Care delayed threatens the business operations of health care providers depleting the availability of primary care services in our community. But, delayed care does not mean the care is not needed. There will be increased demand for health services as restrictions on movement continue to ease and patients seek care that had been postponed under guidelines to put off in-person treatment that is not urgent or emergent. We also anticipate an increase in the number of uninsured community members and residents who will lose their employer-based coverage and will not have resources to purchase insurance increasing the need for safety-net health services.

The organizations participating in Montgomery Cares and Care for Kids remain ready to continue to serve community needs and welcome the support of this special appropriation which specifically tags \$500,000 to support safety-net organizations. This appropriation recognizes the important role safety-net clinic organizations play in our community and the need to ensure sustainable service across the continuum of care. In particular, this appropriation can help to address critical needs associated with clinic sustainability and telehealth capacity.

Clinic sustainability. At the start of the outbreak, DHHS approved an alternative payment mechanism providing lump sum payments to clinics each month based on the average of the highest three months of encounters in the prior fiscal year. This approach ensured clinics have a predictable source of revenue so that they can continue business operations and remain open and ready to serve patients; however, this approach is slated to end at the end of September. With this appropriation there should be sufficient funds to extend this model for as long as is needed in FY21 to ensure the stability of clinic business operations under the current conditions, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the Montgomery Cares system and preserving access to community-based primary care (both in-person and by telehealth).

Sustaining telehealth capacity. This appropriation also specifically recognizes the importance of telehealth as a vital means to extend access to care for patients who are unable to go to their health care provider and who can effectively be treated through telehealth visits. Montgomery Cares participating worked quickly and collaboratively during this crisis to address emerging needs including partnering with the Primary Care Coalition to identify the types of equipment needed to support telehealth at scale including securing and distributing thermometers, home pulse oximeters, heart monitors, and scales and developing procedures for managing the inventory of equipment. Clinics participated in telehealth technical assistance trainings to ensure effective deployment of telehealth and clinics and

the PCC continue to work on process improvement activities to establish effective and sustainable telehealth practices that can serve patients now and in the future.

In addition, we continue to see additional factors that are stressing safety-net health services in the county.

Providing funding for specialty care referrals. Upon reopening their practices, many physician specialists that provide pro-bono services for the Project Access specialty care program have had to prioritize care for paying patients due to the financial pressure on their practices. While understandable, this limits availability of specialty care for Montgomery Cares patients introducing additional pressure to a service area that was already facing the loss of funding due to a discontinued grant.

Expanding access to behavioral health care. Access to behavioral health services is critically important at this time. Through the Montgomery Cares Behavioral Health program patients can receive counseling from a licensed counselor who is able to consult with a psychiatrist when needed. Clinics report rising referral for behavioral health visits and yet the availability of psychiatric consultation has been limited.

Supporting Care for Kids. While not explicitly named in the appropriation we hope DHHS will be able to use some funds from this appropriation to support Care for Kids which expanded rapidly over the last three years. In FY20, Care for Kids processed more than twice as many enrollments than in FY18 (8,400¹ enrollments processed in FY20 vs. 4,056 in FY18). The rapid increase in program enrollment put pressure on the service network and program case management staff. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, School Based Health Centers were at or nearing capacity for CFK slots. During the pandemic, while School Based Health Centers are closed, the 1,400 CFK children who were assigned to school based health as their medical home are being served by paid providers in the CFK network rather than leveraging school health services.

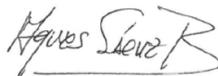
At the same time that this appropriation is being presented, we are aware that a revised spending plan has been developed in the executive branch and that additional revisions may be presented in the future. While we fully appreciate the fiscal pressures we also are concerned that any needed austerity measures should not weaken the health care safety-net which is a vital component of our community's response to COVID-19. We are grateful to the Executive and DHHS staff for making efforts to reduce service impacts for vulnerable populations. We hope that in addition to approving this appropriation, you will ensure that the healthcare for the uninsured programs are not affected by the anticipated proposed savings as that would neutralize the positive benefits of this appropriation.

Providing access to high quality, affordable health care for all residents regardless of their ability to pay, country of origin or documentation status has been a community value in Montgomery County and the Council has long supported that priority. We appreciate your support and continue to be prepared to work with you as we weather this storm.

Sincerely,



Wayne Swann
Chair, Montgomery Cares Advisory Board



Agnes Saenz
Chair, Health Centers Leadership
Council



Dick Bohrer
Chair, External Affairs Committee
Primary Care Coalition

CC:

Tara Clemons, Contract Monitor, Health Care for the Uninsured, Department of Health and Human Services
Linda McMillan, Senior Legislative Analyst, Montgomery County Council

¹ This is an undercount because June 2020 data has not yet been reported. 8400 enrollments were processed between July 1, 2019 and May 31, 2020.