



**Public Hearing before the Montgomery County Council  
Written Testimony – 12-1-2020**

Interfaith Works welcomes the opportunity to present testimony before the Council during this Public Hearing. We support this special appropriation, which is necessary for the County to begin acquiring replacement emergency shelter facilities.

At Interfaith Works (IW), our programs and services focus on helping vulnerable families and individuals reach their maximum potential for sustainable financial independence. IW programs include emergency financial assistance, distribution of free clothing and household goods, vocational and educational services, and a complete continuum of housing – including 3 shelters for our neighbors experiencing homelessness. We have been operating shelters since 1992 and have the capacity to serve 138 individuals each night.

The public health pandemic has required us to change how we provide emergency shelter. Adequate space is required while clients are sleeping, eating, and tending to their daily needs. Additionally, we worked with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to begin offering shelter services year-round at Progress Place, rather than operating only during hypothermia season. This required IW to significantly reduce shelter capacity at The Women's Center and at Progress Place. As a temporary solution, our team is operating a Women's Shelter Overflow at the Coffield Recreation Center, where we serve an additional 65 individuals nightly.

DHHS seeks to acquire additional emergency shelter space, so that Montgomery County can meet the projected need of 300-400 beds – accessible year-round. Our experience indicates that this is a necessity.

In addition, we believe that any new emergency shelter sites should:

- Be moderately sized, with multiple smaller sleeping areas and a total capacity to serve 70 – 100 residents nightly. This will ensure that the facility is easier to manage, given the significant mental and physical health needs that are generally encountered at low-barrier shelters. We are concerned that larger shelters may remove the focus from quickly moving people to permanent housing, as we will be more focused on safely managing the population.
- If two shelters are planned, we recommend that they be in separate facilities. Each site should have enough distance from the other, so that each facility remains private. Neither site should serve more than 100 individuals, ensuring that it may be managed safely. Each site should have ample space, carefully designed for clients to store their belongings and to care for their companion animals.
- Facilitate increased access to mental health supports. Untreated mental health issues are often a barrier that prevents our clients from exiting shelter and securing more permanent housing. In general, we find it challenging for our clients to easily access mental health supports, such as ACT Teams and crisis psychiatric beds.

- Include adequate space that is conducive for effective case management. Both DGS and DHHS should continue to engage shelter providers like IW as sites are selected, so that we may provide subject-matter expertise related to space planning. This will help ensure that selected sites are functional, reflective of client needs, conducive to safely providing shelter, and do not need significant renovation in the future.
- Have 24-hour security in place to ensure safety for clients and staff.
- Include budgets that support adequate compensation for staff. Currently, our front-line shelter staff earn \$19.65/hr. – an increase made possible by temporary hazard pay. Without hazard pay, we expect this to decrease to \$13.25/hr. This is below minimum wage and is all that the contract budget will support. This means that front line staff can earn more with other employers, doing work that requires fewer skills. Our case managers are also earning \$6000-\$8000 annually below the market average. These disparities impact staff retention, the quality and consistency of services to clients, and the ability to attract skilled staff.

Interfaith Works remains committed to a continued partnership with DHHS, as we work to end homelessness for single adults. Granting this special appropriation is a necessary step as Montgomery County ensures that there are sufficient beds for those experiencing homelessness.

Thank you for considering our perspective as you proceed with this Hearing.

Courtney Hall  
Chief Executive Officer