

Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless, Inc. Testimony Before the Montgomery County Council Supporting \$1 million Special Appropriation to Acquire Additional Shelter Space

Susie Sinclair-Smith, Chief Executive Officer

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Good afternoon Councilmembers,

On behalf of the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH), I thank you for the opportunity to testify today about

MCCH is in full support of the proposed \$1 million Special Appropriation to acquire additional shelter space and appreciates the urgency with which both the Executive Branch and Council are moving forward with this critical issue. Due to the approaching end of our ability to use temporary facilities at the men's shelter, MCCH is faced with having 37 beds as of April 2021. We are currently at capacity sheltering approximately over 200 a night. We have not seen the true impact that that freezing weather brings in increasing the numbers we serve during the winter months, nor the stark result of the COVID pandemic's economic impact in the numbers of County residents seeking shelter due to job loss and evictions. This discussion could not come at a better time for us as we need to gear up to meet the need for shelter for men in the coming months.

MCCH has operated the County's emergency shelter for men for 30 years and has extensive experience operating congregate shelters that serve at least 140 men each year during the winter months. With this background, we respectfully offer the following recommendations as the County moves forward in securing permanent shelter locations:

1. MCCH believes that it would be extremely detrimental to co-locate large numbers of men and women experiencing homelessness in one facility knowing the realities of ensuring safety at a men's shelter. We recognize that smaller facilities are needed for men and women to stay together as couples and for vulnerable populations who have experienced domestic violence and/or sexual abuse.
2. MCCH has the capacity to operate large shelters that provide economies of scale as we ensure the health and safety of our clients. We have seen that with the right amount of social distancing and physical space for everyone, we can serve more people without having to create multiple 24/7 operations teams.
3. Upfront investment in time and the expertise of a subject expert to help plan the use of space in a congregate shelter facility will save time and resources in the long run, and will result in more speedy shelter exits and diversions.
4. Adequate space for essential supportive services that is planned considering the flow of the population inside the shelter is essential to helping people move out of shelter quickly. The primary services MCCH provides include on-site somatic and mental health services, case management, housing location, shelter diversion, and medication management. Our staffed

employment lab helped men secure and maintain jobs, which is essential to their ability to afford housing. Opportunities for isolation and privacy are needed as well.

5. Creating a welcoming and safe environment inside and out is a deterrent to people sleeping on the streets (meaning they will come inside), especially youth between 18 and 24. Security cameras, a well designed entrances that have the capacity to scan people when they enter for weapons or drugs, and a dedicated place with privacy for staff to do intakes with new clients including taking personal histories are all essential.
6. The County should provide the People's Committee of the MC Interagency Commission on Homelessness opportunities for input into planning as they are our consumers and have deep seated and collective know-how about what is needed to help them exit homelessness quickly.
7. An emergency shelter facility is not effective without the dedication of consistent and skilled staff who are drawn to helping the County's most vulnerable residents. We serve a vulnerable population where 41% of single adults have high acuity for mental health, 23% have high acuity for substance use, and 10% have high acuity for both mental health and substance use

We join with Interfaith Works, our sister shelter provider, in calling for our front-line staff to receive the minimum wage of \$15 an hour. County contracts have paid these staff, almost all of whom are African American, \$13.25 an hour prior to the onset of COVID and have supplemented these salaries with hazard pay of time and a half (\$21 an hour) during the pandemic. Without the ability to provide hazard pay and hence a competitive salary we are concerned that we will continue to see long term staff leave us for higher earning positions that have come on-line during COVID. Bringing our front line staff to \$15 an hour would require an additional \$76,000, and \$114,000 with hazard pay.

MCCH looks forward to working with the HHS and DGS as we move forward expeditiously to find needed space. As we have seen the demand for shelter increase significantly amongst our population, it is clear the need for permanent bed space for men far exceeds that for women. We ask going forward, that our meetings with HHS and DGS structured to best get meaningful and in depth that is focused on the needs service providers of different populations. Again, thank you for your attention to this matter.