

Jo Shifrin
Bethesda, MD

Testimony - FY23 Operating Budget
Position: Favorable with Amendments

My name is Jo Shifrin, I live in Bethesda, and I am a member of Jews United for Justice. I am writing in support of the FY23 Budget with amendments.

There are many things to recommend in the FY 23 Montgomery County Budget:

- Additional Wellness Centers in high schools and enhanced mental health funding for the high schools that don't yet have a wellness center
- Additional school nurse positions, so that every elementary, middle, and high school has a school nurse
- Additional funding for the Mobile Crisis and Outreach Teams
- Funding for a new "988" mental health hotline
- Funding for affordable housing and outreach to the homeless
- Funding for Black community businesses
- Additional funding for the Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice

However, I believe changes should be made to this budget in three areas.

1. **The proposed MCPD Community Resources Bureau is unnecessary.** It provides a permanent home for Community Engagement Officers (CEOs) when we should be removing CEOs from schools. The presence of uniformed, armed police in schools is discriminatory and perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline. The presence of police does not prevent gun violence or other harms in schools.

Additionally, we do not need a new bureaucracy in the Police Department, to organize and run midnight basketball games, summer camps, or chess tournaments when those activities would be better run by the County Parks and Recreation Department.

I believe that the budget is a moral document and that nonprofits are the organizations that are trained to provide services to our community. Currently, nonprofits are not being fully funded, and it would be wiser to invest the \$5.5 million budgeted for the

Community Resources Bureau into the nonprofits in our county who have asked for additional funding.

2. **The County needs a more robust behavioral health care first response and stabilization program.** Data from here and from around the country demonstrate that expanded use of Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams will provide better care for those experiencing a mental health crisis, improve response times, reduce the chance that a person in crisis will be injured or killed by police, and will free up police to do the job of fighting crime. Based on the Crisis Now/CAHOOTS model, we estimate that a crisis team response without police would be appropriate for 97% of behavioral health incidents. This approach in Maricopa County, Arizona improved public safety and freed up 37 officers to focus on crime rather than mental health. Police are trained as warriors, not as guardians; they should only be called upon when the situation is, in fact, dangerous, as assessed by the mental health crisis team members. When people need care beyond what can be provided by the mobile crisis teams, they should have the option of going to a facility that addresses the immediate and short-term support they need. A facility can provide recliners for observation for the first 23 hours and sub-acute beds where people can spend up to 3 days in a home-like setting to give people a place to stabilize.
3. **The County needs mental health support for MCPS students, not CEOs.** Historically, when School Resource Officers were present in schools, Black students — who represented 22% of the student population — made up 45% of the arrests. When officers were not stationed in schools, between August and December 2021, the police were called nearly 1,700 times, yet less than 1%, or 11 incidents, dealt with immediate safety concerns. Non-police school personnel could have handled the vast majority of these incidents. Any presence of armed law enforcement does not prevent school shootings, gun-related incidences, or other harms, but their presence does have harmful effects on students with disabilities and students of color. Montgomery County should take a different approach. The mental health-specific components of Wellness Centers (a therapist, a case manager, and youth development services) should be quickly provided to students in all 31 high schools and 40 middle schools in our County.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. I respectfully urge the County Council to approve the budget with the aforementioned amendments.