

My name is Linda Bergofsky. I am writing as a resident of Poolesville, a member of Jews United for Justice, a social worker with experience in trauma-informed care for children and adolescents, and most importantly, as a substitute teacher in the Montgomery County Public Schools. My comments on the budget reflect my long-standing preference that we deploy the right people with the right training to do the right job at the right time. Any mismatch between agency mission, individual skill sets, documented needs, and allocation of resources means missed opportunities, wasted money, dissatisfied employees and County residents, and lives lost.

As the County Council considers this budget submission, I trust you will keep in mind that budgets are moral documents. To that end, this budget should include what the County has committed and promised to its citizens. Notably, the County promised instead of police showing up to every crisis scene, there will be a shift to a different model of crisis response, starting with how police are dispatched. Instead, this budget includes funds for the creation of a Community Resources Bureau (CRB), which is an unnecessary, disingenuous and dangerous back door to expanding police presence in our communities and schools. I explicitly ask that you reject this budget item. Relatedly, the budget fails to fund a robust mental health crisis intervention and outreach program in the community. And finally, this budget shortchanges students and staff across MCPS with insufficient and inadequate funding for the entire range of services meeting their biopsychosocial needs. We all deserve a more moral and just use of citizen funding if we are to realize the promises made to us by the County.

I will start with observations about the MCPD budget and requested changes. The proposed CRB is slated to require \$5.5 million in its first year and adds another 39 positions to the MCPD. In as much as neither the Reimagining Public Safety Task Force nor the Preliminary Audit recommended anything like the CRB, and MCPD has not documented what problems it is trying to solve with the CRB, it would appear its sole purpose is to prop up the image of the MCPD in a throwback to the days of Officer Friendly. To wit, I oppose use of taxpayer dollars for 1,300 community events envisioned by the CRB that are already offered by the Parks and Recreation Department, among others. County departments with expertise in these service areas and types of programming should be running these programs, not the MCPD. Also buried in this budget item is funding for the Community Engagement Officers, a program that is already opposed by high school students, is highly discriminatory, and perpetuates the schools-to-prison pipeline, in addition to the fact that it is ineffective in preventing gun and gang violence.

The County's behavioral health first-responder plans are inadequate, notwithstanding planned improvements. Even as the County brings on peer support staff, this budget will only support 5 or 6 teams to cover the entire County, and only then during the busiest times of the day. Clearly, this expansion falls short, especially in the "services desert" in Poolesville and other Ag Reserve communities. For so many reasons, the County must reduce dependence on police as first responders to mental health crises. Data from both our County and from around the country demonstrate that the expanded use of Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams (MCOT) can deliver better care for those experiencing a behavioral health crisis, improve response times, reduce the chances that the person will be killed or injured by the police, and free up police to address crime rather than behavioral health crises, which they are ill-equipped and ill-trained to do. I firmly believe Ryan LeRoux, Kevin Costlow, Robert White, and Finan Berhe would all still be alive today if the County had a robust behavioral health care-first response. Based on the number and complexity of calls already coming into the County, I am asking for three times as many positions to be allocated to the budget: a total of 155.2 full-time-equivalents and total salaries of \$9.1 million. This level of services will provide for 3 teams for each of the six districts (18 teams in total) to respond at any given

time, thus providing real 24/7 coverage for the whole County. And, when people need care beyond what the mobile crisis teams can provide, they should have the option of voluntarily going to a facility that matches the immediate and specific short-term support they may need and give people a place to stabilize that is more appropriate than a psychiatric bed. Please consider funding the entire continuum of care, from street outreach to short-term stabilization.

Lastly, I vehemently oppose funding for Community Engagement Officers (CEOs) in public schools. In the last school year for which data are available (2018-2019), Black students made up 22% of the MCPS student population yet represented 45% of the School Resource Officer (SRO) arrests. Similarly, special education students made up 13% of the MCPS student population and 25% of the SRO arrests. I join with the County's students who are calling for more resources to deter and prevent violence, rather than funding a program that feeds students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Between August and December of 2021 - when officers were not stationed in schools, but assigned as CEOs - police were still called to schools almost 1,700 times. In just 63 days of classroom instruction, the police were called 1,700 times! However, less than 1% - 11 incidents out of the nearly 1,700 times the police were called - involved immediate safety concerns. These numbers demonstrate that rather than relying on CEOs exclusively for serious and imminent dangers, school staff are calling for officers with guns because they lack the resources to otherwise address these issues (either proactively or in real time). I will grant the schools the grace of not intending to intimidate students, but that is what happens. Other data collected by MCPS and MCPD demonstrate that SRO programs do not prevent shootings or gun-related incidences, and have many harmful effects on students with disabilities and students of color, and in particular Black boys. I demand a different approach. Specifically, I recommend funding mental health supports for students in all 31 high schools and all 40 middle schools.

I know the pressures school staffs and leadership are under as they deal with students who have not been able to progress academically and socially over the past two years because of remote learning. I work with students in grades 1 through 12 and in five different school clusters (Poolesville, Northwest, Thomas S. Wooten, Seneca Valley, and Quince Orchard). On any given day throughout this current academic year, I have encountered students in crisis, immature for their age and unable to manage their emotions in a productive way. As I noted above, police officers, however essential they are to public safety, are not trained to deal with people in a behavioral health crisis, especially children. Even though I am trained as a social worker, I know my limitations as a substitute teacher and would welcome having access to a cadre of staff beyond the school nurse or guidance counselor when one of my students experiences a behavioral health crisis. Having such staff in the schools who know the students, their families, and their teachers would help all of us who care about kids.

It has been estimated from this budget that the mental health-specific components of the Wellness Centers (a therapist, a case manager, and positive youth development services) cost approximately \$600,000 at each high school. I wholeheartedly support Councilmember Navarro's proposal to provide \$11.4 million to close the gap in mental health supports for the 19 high schools that lack a Wellness Center in the upcoming fiscal year. These mental health supports should also be extended to our County's 40 middle schools. Based on the size of MCPS middle schools, it is estimated that these supports would cost \$300,000 per middle school for a total cost of about \$12 million. This is not a large sum to meet the needs of our children, many of whom are suffering from the trauma caused by Covid-related issues, in addition to other mental health issues that affect so many young people. Thank you for your attention.