



Montgomery County Community Action Board Testimony for FY23 Operating Budget
Tiffany Jones, Chair
April 20, 2022

Good evening, Council President Albornoz, Vice President Glass, and members of the County Council. My name is Tiffany Jones and I am the Chair of the Montgomery County Community Action Board. Thank you for the opportunity to share our Board's budget priorities for FY23.

The role of the Community Action Board is two-fold. We serve as the governing body for the Community Action Agency and, along with the Head Start Parents Policy Council, for the County's Head Start program. We also advocate on behalf of lower-income County residents, addressing issues that directly impact community members. Therefore, I will be speaking with you about our agency's needs and the priority issues impacting lower-income residents.

Early Care and Education/ Head Start

Early care and education continues to be a primary focus for our board. We greatly appreciated the Council's leadership this year in establishing an independent entity to oversee early care and education in the County, and we were thrilled that the board's recommendation to require low-income representation on the new entity's board was included in the final legislation. We also appreciate the inclusion of additional funds to support the County's Early Care and Education Initiative in the FY23 budget.

Our board has been closely tracking the Blueprint for Maryland's Future and the plans for Pre-K expansion here in the County. While we are excited about the new opportunities to provide high-quality early care and education to more children, we are also concerned about the impact on Head Start. Since the Head Start program complies with federal Performance Standards and the services offered to Head Start children and their families are also offered to Pre-K children

and their families, we must ensure that adequate resources are available to remain in compliance. A particular concern for our board is the need for more school health nurses. While we appreciate the inclusion of funding in the FY23 budget for six new school health nurses, we recognize that only some elementary schools have a dedicated nurse. We ask the Council to allocate funds to ensure that every elementary school with Head Start/Pre-K classes, including the newest classes being established through Blueprint funds, has its own dedicated nurse. This will help to ensure that Head Start and Pre-K children continue to receive the same high-quality health services, screenings, and referrals, and will ensure that our Head Start program remains in compliance with all requirements.

VITA

The Community Action Agency hosts the County's only year-round free tax preparation program for lower-income households, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program. Staff and volunteers work tirelessly to ensure that the households they serve receive all of the credits for which they are eligible. This tax season presented historic opportunities and many challenges.

Our agency's VITA program started the tax season using a virtual model due to the surge in COVID-19 cases. The program later switched to a hybrid model in March to allow for some in-person appointments in Gaithersburg and Rockville, with pop-up sites at WorkSource Montgomery in Wheaton. This switch was essential since many clients needed in-person services due to lack of technology, disabilities, and other limitations that made virtual appointments very difficult. The logistics involved in making this change, along with the reduced number of volunteers this year, resulted in fewer community members being served. At the same time, the expansions for the EITC and CTC meant that Community Action VITA clients received almost \$4 million in tax refunds and credits as of the first week of April. This number will increase substantially once the final stats for the tax season are calculated.

In FY23, we hope to increase our numbers by offering more in-person appointments at multiple locations, along with some virtual appointments. Since the demand for free tax help is much higher than the number of appointments our agency can offer, we ask that the Council consider additional funding for the VITA Partnership in FY23 so that all VITA sites can increase capacity and consider adding funding for contractors to assist in coordinating our tax credit campaign, which has increased significantly.

EITC Outreach

The expansion of the Child Tax Credit and the federal and state Earned Income Tax Credit, along with the County's Working Families Income Supplement, meant that households received substantially larger refunds this year. We greatly appreciate the Council's leadership in ensuring funding for the WFIS so that it could remain a 100% match of the state EITC and for the first time, include ITIN taxpayers.

Community Action recognized the historic nature of this tax year and has been engaged in an extensive EITC outreach campaign, much of which focused on ITIN taxpayers and the credits they are newly eligible for. The goal is to increase awareness of the EITC and CTC and help to ensure that more eligible taxpayers claim these credits. The campaign has included 111 Ride On bus signs in seven languages, bilingual signs for 311 and MCPL digital monitors, training for DHHS staff and nonprofits, several interviews (in English and Spanish) with local media outlets, a bilingual text messaging campaign with 68,000 recipients, a bilingual article in the MCPS Quicknotes newsletter, and a well-attended Facebook event conducted in Spanish, which was hosted in collaboration with the Latino Health Initiative. We thank Council President Albornoz for his participation as a panelist at this event and for his ongoing commitment to this issue.

TESS Community Action Center

As you may know, the TESS Community Action Center, which links residents to numerous services and programs, is in the process of moving to a new location across the street in the Long Branch community. TESS facility needs have been a longstanding priority for our board,

and we appreciate the Council's leadership in addressing this issue. We are thrilled about the new facility that will help the TESS team continue to provide critical services to residents using a culturally-competent, whole-family approach. We hope to see you at a ribbon cutting event at the new TESS facility next month. We will share more details with you soon.

Navigation

Utilizing CARES Act funding, Community Action has been able to implement a new program at TESS that includes five full-time Navigators. The Navigators utilize a model of service delivery that the TESS team has perfected over the years, linking residents to all of the services they and their families may need. While the CARES-funded positions will end in the fall, we appreciate that the DHHS budget now includes new positions at Community Action to build upon their best practices, improving residents' equitable access to services throughout HHS. Ensuring that residents can easily access critical services is an ongoing priority for our board and we are grateful to know that the Council also recognizes the importance of access to services.

Housing

Affordable housing remains a critical concern for lower-income County residents. CAI participants tell us regularly about the challenges they face trying to find affordable housing, along with their struggles with unresponsive landlords who do not maintain the property and may still impose rent increases. We appreciate the Council's support for increased affordable housing options and your continued leadership on renters' rights issues. We must acknowledge though that over half of all renters remain housing burdened and about 64% of households with an annual income of less than \$75,000 are housing burdened.¹ We ask that this issue remain a priority for the Council and that you explore every opportunity to expand affordable housing options in the County.

¹ 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) <http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>

Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot Program

Community Action has been excited to participate in the planning process for the County's new Guaranteed Basic Income (GBI) Pilot Program and we are thrilled to have graduates of the CAI participate as well. We applaud the Council for its leadership on this initiative and for establishing this groundbreaking program. In Montgomery County, where the Self-Sufficiency Standard for a family of four with two adults, one preschooler, and one infant is nearly \$106,000, over three times the County's minimum wage and four times the Federal Poverty Level, innovative programs like this one must be explored.² As Dr. Diana Pearce, author of the Self-Sufficiency Standard has noted, and extensive research on tax credits has proven, the best way to help people move towards self-sufficiency and improve their well-being is to increase their income. We look forward to tracking the progress of the GBI pilot program and its impact on the community.

Lastly, we are excited to note that during these budget hearings, you have already heard from several participants in our board's Community Advocacy Institute, a free advocacy training program for lower-income County residents. This year's participants focused their testimony on a wide range of issues, including mental health, services for children with special needs, child care, and the environment. Many of the issues that CAI participants care most deeply about are also priorities for our board and some of their concerns have been incorporated into this testimony.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening and highlight the Community Action Board's priorities. We look forward to working with you to continue to explore programs and opportunities to support vulnerable community members.

² <https://selfsufficiencystandard.org/>