



Testimony of Derrick B. Owens
Board President
On behalf of Mid-County United Ministries, Inc.
Regarding County Executive Marc Elrich's FY23 Budget Proposal
Before the
Montgomery County Council

April 20, 2022

Council President Alborno and other members of the Montgomery County Council, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you this evening about County Executive Marc Elrich's FY23 Budget. I am Derrick Owens and I'm the board president of Mid-County United Ministries, Inc. (MUM), which is located in the Westfield Wheaton South Building at 11002 Veirs Mill Road, 7th Floor, Wheaton, MD. My remarks will focus on the proposed inflationary increase for non-profit contracts and the new Office of Food System Resilience.

MUM relies heavily on private donations and numerous fundraising initiatives to fund its operations. It also receives financial support through several Montgomery County government programs and is a designated Emergency Assistance Coalition (EAC) member, headed by Interfaith Works of Montgomery County. Therefore, I want to thank the Montgomery County Government for its long-standing support of MUM. On behalf of the MUM Board, I would

also like to express our commitment to continuing our partnership with the various government agencies that help us achieve our mission.

MUM strongly supports an inflationary increase for non-profit contracts, Community grants and agency baseline budgets. In his FY23 Budget, County Executive Elrich has proposed a 6 percent inflationary increase for all county non-profit contracts. On April 12, 2022, the U.S. Department of Labor announced that the annual inflation rate is 7.9 percent. What is being proposed by the County Executive is still well below the current rate of inflation. Therefore, MUM believes the County Council should adopt the 10% inflationary increase for non-profit contracts as advocated for by Nonprofit Montgomery, of which MUM is a member. Adopting a higher inflationary increase would allow MUM to take full advantage of the resources it receives by being able to keep pace with the rising costs of providing goods and services to clients.

About Mid-County United Ministries, Inc. (MUM)

MUM is an independent 501(c)(3) non-denominational, non-profit organization that was founded in 1996 by 12 congregations in the 20902 and 20906 zip codes. We unified to help provide a safety net for the most vulnerable and food insecure people in our communities including the disabled, elderly residents on fixed incomes, the unemployed, and a high percentage of children in those families. MUM's mission is to help people in crisis in the Silver Spring, Wheaton, Kensington, Rockville and Aspen Hill communities with food, medicine, eviction prevention and utilities, emphasizing client choice, problem-solving and self-sufficiency.

At its inception, MUM's primary focus was providing financial assistance to clients who were about to be evicted or to have their utility service shutoff. A few years later, MUM started

providing emergency financial assistance to clients who needed help paying for medical prescriptions they could not afford. In 2004, after realizing that food insecurity was common in Montgomery County and particularly in the local communities we serve, MUM started offering 20 to 25 pounds of shelf-stable food to our clients on a monthly basis.

Over the years, more and more clients started coming to MUM for food. After talking with clients and in reviewing the data, we realized that the need for food assistance in the communities MUM serves was greater than expected. Limited office hours posed a challenge for some; a parallel challenge was transportation. Many of our clients are dependent on public transportation and find it difficult to carry 25 pounds of food home. To address these concerns, MUM sought to take the food to where prospective clients live.

In 2016, MUM was fortunate to receive seed-money from a private donor to start its Sunday Mobile Food Pantry distribution operation. Food is loaded into a box-truck at the storage unit we rent and then it is driven to a neighborhood, making it more accessible to those who need it but who may not be able to get to the MUM office during normal business hours. I would note that by going out into the community, MUM has seen a significant increase in non-English speakers seeking food. The Sunday Mobile Pantry operates in conjunction with the regular office choice pantry.

MUM Operations Pre-COVID to Today

The pandemic has truly exposed the level of food insecurity and inequity in Montgomery County, and especially in the zip codes (e.g., 20902, 20906, 20895, 209853 and 20896) that

MUM serves as an EAC. In FY19, MUM distributed 70,280 pounds of shelf-stable food through its office choice pantry and Sunday Mobile Pantry to slightly more than 2,500 clients.

Once COVID hit and the country went on lockdown, MUM was fortunate that it was already operating a mobile food pantry because we closed our office and moved our entire food distribution operation to our Sunday Mobile Pantry locations – it is worth noting that the Sunday food distribution occurs regardless of the weather conditions or if that day happens to be a holiday. To protect our volunteers, staff and clients, we ended our “choice pantry” system and implemented a “grab-n-go” system where clients are given a pre-packed bag of shelf-stable food. Prior to March 2020, MUM’s average monthly food distribution was just under 7,000 pounds. After March, that figure jumped to 14,600 pounds.

In FY 21, the first full year of the pandemic, MUM distributed more than 300,000 pounds of food (shelf-stable and fresh produce) to nearly 7,830 clients. At the height of the pandemic MUM was distributing on average 25,000 pounds of food per month. Clients also saw a significant increase in the amount of food they were able to take home – on average recipients received approximately 38 pounds of food. Clients would not have received as much food without the County funding that helped MUM secure fresh produce. In regard to the current fiscal year (FY22), MUM continues to distribute more than 20,000 pounds of food per month to clients and by the end of this fiscal year expects to distribute more than 250,000 pounds of food to close to 7,000 clients.

MUM is constantly fundraising to be able to purchase food to address the food insecurity needs of our neighbors. It relies on donations from individuals as well as organizations. MUM also

relies on the County Government. In fact, thus far the County has provided MUM more than \$85,000 through the emergency procurement program or special appropriation to purchase non-perishable food and fresh produce from local farmers and local food distributors. Addressing food insecurity is extremely important and it is not achievable alone – it requires an “all-hands-on-deck” approach. That is why MUM supports the proposal in the County Executive’s FY23 Budget proposal which seeks to implement a recommendation made by the Food Security Taskforce to address food insecurity through public-private partnerships.

Challenges Ahead for MUM and Montgomery County

As we move further away from COVID preparedness and toward recovery and sustainability, the problem of food insecurity and food inequity will not go away immediately. Coordination among non-profit groups like MUM and the County government will be vital to resolving these issues.

As stated earlier, MUM’s mission is to help people in crisis with food, medicine, eviction prevention and utility shutoff assistance. There will be a continued need to address food inequity (which also includes providing culturally sensitive foods) throughout the County, especially in the EAC zip codes MUM serves which happen to be some of the most culturally diverse areas throughout the County.

As it relates to the other services that MUM provides, MUM anticipates a significant increase in evictions and utility cut-offs. During FY19, MUM spent nearly \$24,000 to help a total of 80 families with eviction prevention assistance. It also spent nearly \$29,000 to prevent a total of 105 families from having their utility service shut off. It is important to note that MUM receives

money through a County grant, Interfaith Works, and private donations for these services. In FY21, we helped fewer families with this type of assistance (\$11,000 to 17 families for eviction prevention and \$7,153 to 53 families to prevent a utility service from being turned off), but with the national and local moratoriums ending, MUM must determine how best to handle the onslaught of requests that are now being received for emergency financial help. In the short time since the moratoriums were lifted, MUM has found itself working with clients who owe thousands of dollars in back rent and hundreds of dollars in past due utility bills. We need to increase limits on how much individual organizations can provide clients at risk for eviction or utility cutoff to more efficiently address the very large debts accumulated during the pandemic.

As in the past, MUM continues partner with Interfaith Works and other community organizations to help clients piece together funding from a variety of sources to prevent them from being evicted or from having their utility shut off. However, we cannot do it alone. The County Government must continue to help provide assistance in order to address these increasing problems. At a minimum, the County Council should approve the County Executive's 6 percent inflationary increase for non-profit grants, Community Grant programs and agency budgets as this will be helpful. As indicated earlier, MUM believes a 10% across the board increase is warranted since inflation continues to rise and the service needs throughout the County are great.

As I conclude my remarks, I encourage you to visit our website (www.mumhelp.org) to learn more about our entire operation. I also would like to extend an invitation to you and your staff to visit one of our Sunday Mobile Pantry sites. Again, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you this evening. I look forward to answering any questions you may have for me.