

**FY '23 COA SUGGESTED BUDGET PRIORITIES
TESTIMONY FOR COUNTY COUNCIL**

County Executive's Proposed Budget

- COA appreciates the fact that the County Executive has included some much-needed funding to meet the needs of older adults.

Communication

- Montgomery County provides a myriad of services for older adult residents. However, the County does not do as well at making residents aware of these services. Staff assigned to communicating to residents about these services would be helpful in marketing and advertise services for older adults.
- A senior fellow would be an ideal, cost-effect way to fill such a position.

Transportation

- We appreciate that the County Executive restored funding for the Jewish Council for the Aging (JCA) Escorted Transportation Program to pre-pandemic level of approximately \$130,000 from approximately \$85,000 during the pandemic. Please support the restored funding for this vital program.
- The income eligibility level - \$40,000 in annual income – for this program has not been adjusted for inflation since its inception. This is maintained by an agreement between DHHS and JCA. COA asks your help in encouraging DHHS to consider increasing the income threshold.

Protecting Older Adults from Fraud and Abuse

- Please support the County Executive's recommendation to add 6 Adult Protective Services (APS) staff. In addition to improving the responsiveness to potential instances of abuse and neglect, the additional positions will allow other Aging and Disability Services social workers to focus on assessing clients for much-needed programs, such as Social Services to Adults and In-Home Aide Services.

Housing

- The County Executive's proposed budget includes money for the Housing Initiative Fund (HIF). Despite recent HIF funding increases, the County still will not have enough affordable housing to meet expected population increases. Compounding the problem, almost all areas along transit corridors are losing existing affordable housing, resulting in an increase in cost burdened renters. Rising rents will put more pressure on senior renters to choose between rent, food, and health care.

- Older adults are the fastest growing group in the county. As their numbers grow so will the number of older adult renters. In fact, by 2040, one in 5 residents will be 65 or older and one out of 3 will be 55 and older. Also, according to County data, over 65% of senior renters are rent burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on rent. The oldest seniors 75 and 85 plus face the greatest challenges because over time incomes tend to decline and housing cost burdens increase, with some paying more than half their income on housing costs.
- We note, however, that even this is not enough to meet the increasing need for affordable housing for older residents in the County and that you continue to look for ways to make housing affordable.

Funding for Access HEARS

- Statistics show that nearly two-thirds of people age 70 and older are affected by hearing loss, which is often associated with many health problems including dementia, social isolation, and hospital readmission. The current hearing care model of clinic-based, fee-for-service hearing care does not accommodate the needs of the majority of low-income, minority, and vulnerable older adults. Affording hearing aids, which can be the 3rd most expensive purchase for older adults behind house and car, is out of the question for many Montgomery County residents. For these reasons and others, the County needs a community-delivered approach to hearing care that is affordable and accessible.
- Access HEARS has a proven model of care that increases access to hearing loss intervention and at a dramatically reduced cost compared to the traditional models. Access HEARS has been operating as a Baltimore-based 501(c)(3) with the mission of systematically addressing each of the barriers to providing hearing help to those who have not traditionally accessed care. In 2019, Access HEARS received grants from the Maryland Department of Aging for programs in Allegany and Garrett Counties. The Maryland pilot programs were very successful and the cost savings for intervention is about 90% compared to the traditional hearing aid care model.
- With the anticipated expansion of over-the-counter hearing technology pending FDA regulations, the need to help older adults navigate the market, select a device, and learn how to use it successfully will also grow. By utilizing the Access HEARS model, the County can develop a sustainable model of hearing care that connects older adults with the technology that represents the future of hearing care. We ask the County to fund a program that will provide immediate benefit to the hearing health and overall wellbeing of the County older adult population.

Funding Expansion of In-Home Care to More Adults

- The older population of Montgomery County is rising at an unprecedented rate. Many studies have confirmed that older adults overwhelmingly prefer to remain in their own

homes and therefore actively seek home and community- based services (HCBC) to avoid assisted living or nursing home placement.

- The County should explore using its grants programs to fund nonprofits that could provide in-home care, such as those the County Executive proposes funding--Home Care Partners and Community Reach, through its Senior Reach program.
- The COA is hosting our Forum on May 5 at Bohr Park in Gaithersburg on In-Home Care – We Can Do Better
- We encourage all County Council Members or their staff persons to attend this informative event.