



## Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc.

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### Testimony on the FY25 Operating Budget Presented by the Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc. to the Montgomery County Council April 9, 2024

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to present testimony. I am Celia Serkin, Executive Director of the Montgomery County Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health, Inc. (MC Federation of Families), a family peer-led organization funded by the Montgomery County DHHS Behavioral Health and Crisis Services (BHCS) to serve diverse families in our county who have children, youth, and/or young adults with mental health, substance use, or co-occurring challenges. All staff, except the Administrative Assistant, are parents who have raised children with mental health, substance use, and/or co-occurring challenges. The Administrative Assistant is an adult consumer.

#### **We are asking the County Council to increase funding for our organization so that:**

- **Staff can receive decent salaries, get health benefits, and have an efficient infrastructure that supports their work, including having access to a well-designed human services database system; and**
- **We can hire another bilingual (Spanish/English) Family Peer Specialist.**

**We are asking for an additional \$250,000 for FY25. Our staff are suffering financially due to having exceptionally low salaries, no health benefits, and a limited infrastructure to document their work and support them.**

**The County has funded our organization for almost two decades.** In the early 2000s, I directed the family component of Community Kids, Montgomery County's first Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) system of care grant. The grant helped families whose children were served by multiple agencies, but were not achieving success, and thus, were at risk of residential placement or more restrictive educational levels. These children had a mental health condition that significantly affected their emotional and behavioral functioning. The grant offered wraparound and family peer support to families whose children were enrolled in the initiative. Through this grant, Montgomery County worked to build a family-driven, youth-guided, culturally competent, and community-based system of care for children and youth with mental health challenges and their families. I successfully revived the local family support organization, MC Federation of Families, to absorb, sustain, and expand the family component of the SAMHSA grant. The County provided funding to the Collaboration Council for wraparound and to our family peer-led organization for family peer support, thereby sustaining both components of the grant.

**Our staff have continuously provided family peer support services to Montgomery County families for almost two decades, including during the Great Recession and the COVID pandemic.** We provide the Family Advocate who serves on the Collaboration Council's Local Care Team (LCT), which is an interagency team of public, youth-serving agencies determining how to best use local resources to keep the family intact and increase both adult and child/youth family members' functioning. The LCT is the pathway to wraparound services in the community. Our organization offers individualized and targeted family peer support, information and referral, family navigation services, support groups, educational programs and parenting workshops, extensive outreach activities, recovery coaching and training, advocacy, leadership opportunities, and training on administering NARCAN® Nasal Spray and using Fentanyl test strips and Deterra® Drug Deactivation Pouches. We are an official Harm Reduction Site for Maryland. Anyone can refer a Montgomery County family who has a child, youth, or young adult with a mental health, substance use, or co-occurring challenge or another behavioral health need to our organization. Families in Montgomery County can self-refer to our organization. Families are not charged for our services, educational programs, and/or training. Families in Montgomery County can receive our family peer support services if they have Medicaid, commercial insurance, Care for Kids, or no insurance. There is no income eligibility requirement. **Our family peer-led organization has positive outcomes and good satisfaction survey scores.**

**There is a fundamental problem of pay and benefit equity.** We have 8 staff, 4 of whom provide family peer support services directly to families in Montgomery County who have children, youth, and/or young adults with mental health, substance use, or co-occurring challenges. Of the 4, 3 are full-time and 1 is part-time. The other positions are Executive Director, Family Peer Support Supervisor, Data Specialist with extremely limited hours, and Administrative Assistant. **The County's DHHS Behavioral and Crisis Services has been hiring Peers internally at much higher rates and with comprehensive benefits. Many Peers hired by the County have fewer years of experience than our staff have. For example, the Peers hired to work at the Crisis Center are grade 16 and make between**

\$50,438 at minimum and \$78,947 at maximum annually and receive comprehensive benefits. In contrast, our staff have exceptionally low salaries and no health benefits. They also do not have a well-designed human services database system that would help them more efficiently document their work. Our Certified Family Peer Specialists have hourly rates ranging from \$16.69/hour to \$18.64/hour. The Family Peer Support Supervisor makes \$23.12/hour. The Administrative Assistant, who is an adult consumer, makes only \$15.38/hour. All Program staff are nationally certified as Certified Family Peer Specialists and are working on getting their state certification as Certified Peer Recovery Specialists-Family in Maryland. The Family Peer Support Supervisor is an approved Supervisor of Family Peer Specialists and Peer Recovery Specialists-Family. Moreover, she is an approved trainer of various parenting skills curricula, Harm Reduction, recovery coaching, and system of care modules. Our staff have worked with our organization for over 8 to 16 years. The bilingual (Spanish/English) Certified Family Peer Specialist has two master's degrees, one in Latin American Studies and the other an MBA. The Certified Family Peer Specialist who focuses on special education advocacy has a master's degree in public health. Our Certified Family Peer Specialist with expertise in wraparound and youth-serving systems has a B.S. in human resource management. Our staff are subject matter experts on family peer support, wraparound, systems of care, navigating youth-serving systems and social service agencies, special education advocacy, coping skills, stress reduction, family-driven and youth-driven care, and cultural and trauma responsive family peer support. They help parents progress on their journey toward self-advocacy and self-efficacy through the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and a network of resources and supports.

**Our Certified Family Peer Specialists and the County Peers working at the Crisis Center are funded through the same source, that is, DHHS Behavioral Health and Crisis Services. The huge pay inequity harms our staff, especially given the high Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montgomery County, the recent inflation, and the increase in interests rates being used to lessen inflation.<sup>1</sup>** For example, one of our Certified Family Peer Specialists is a grandmother who has no children to claim as dependents. She gets her health insurance through the Maryland Health Connection. She currently cannot afford one of her medications. Two of her critical conditions are serious heart disease and fatty liver disease. She recently received a bill from Kaiser for \$6,000 and is working with them to determine what help she can receive. She makes only \$16.69/hour and receives no health benefits from our organization. She can no longer afford to work for us and will be leaving after 14 years. Another Certified Family Peer Specialist is raising her two grandchildren whose mother, her daughter, has severe mental health challenges. This Certified Family Peer Specialist is struggling to survive financially and is having difficulty making ends meet. She lost one adult son in 2018 and another in 2023. She was unable to pay for the funeral expenses for her sons. She too feels that she can no longer afford to work for our organization. After working with our organization for 16 years, she is considering other employment options that offer better pay and health benefits.

**With the youth mental health crisis and the youth opioid epidemic, the demand for our family peer support services continues to increase. We need to hire another bilingual (Spanish/English) Family Peer Specialist, but do not have the funding to do this. Furthermore, we are not competitive in the marketplace due to exceptionally low salaries and a lack of health benefits. We have also been adversely affected by the workforce crisis.**

The inflationary adjustments given annually are used to help cover the cost of running the organization. Many expenses, such as rent, accounting, and IT, continue to increase. There simply are not enough dollars to give raises to all staff across the board. We have diversified funding, but this does not solve the main problem, that is, our core funding from DHHS Behavioral Health and Crisis Services is insufficient.

**Our staff deserve to receive decent pay and health benefits comparable to what Peers working for the County are making, especially given that both groups are funded from the same source, i.e., DHHS Behavioral Health and Crisis Services. Our Certified Family Peer Specialists are performing the vital functions that the County wants them to do for Montgomery County families. They play a key role in addressing the youth mental health crisis and the youth opioid epidemic and can be a lifeline for families.**

**We ask the County Council to increase funding to our family peer-led organization so that: 1) our staff can thrive financially and have a solid infrastructure while continuing to provide critical family peer support services to families in Montgomery County who have children, youth, and/or young adults with mental health, substance use, or co-occurring challenges; and 2) we can hire another bilingual (Spanish/English) Family Peer Specialist to meet the ever increasing demand for these services.**

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<sup>1</sup>The Self-Sufficiency Standard for Montgomery County, Maryland 2023, Prepared for the Montgomery County Community Action Agency by the University of Washington. ([www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/MDMontCo2023\\_SSS\(1\).pdf](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/MDMontCo2023_SSS(1).pdf))