



April 9, 2024

Council President Friedson, Vice President Stewart, and Councilmembers,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify. My name is Manny Hidalgo, and I am the Executive Director of Shepherd's Table in Downtown Silver Spring, in District 4. I am also a 25-year resident of Montgomery County.

In our 40 years of service, we have seen a record increase in guests seeking daily meals, essential items from our resource center, and clothes from our clothes closet. While we can keep up with this increase in need with the generous support of our community, we have learned that additional specialized assistance can make a massive difference in guiding guests through their journey toward self-sufficiency.

Many of our most vulnerable meal guests at Progress Place struggle with co-occurring disabilities and mental health challenges. While we try to personally engage with each person entering our building, there is a clear shortage of mental health professionals. Recognizing the shared responsibility in addressing these challenges, we have worked closely with our partners at Interfaith Works and the County's Services to End and Prevent Homelessness to ask for **three full-time peer support specialists** to serve at Progress Place. These specialists will help provide and coordinate services for clients who also have histories of homelessness, disability, substance abuse, criminal justice, and traumas. Peer support specialists are considered a best practice program, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration reports that they bring increased social functioning. The specialists also have been shown to decrease hospital admission rates, substance use and depression, and psychotic symptoms. Funding this relatively small line item at \$207, 950 for Interfaith Works will have a big impact on the community at Progress Place, downtown Silver Spring, and the County at large.

To demonstrate the power of peer specialists, I want to share the story of one of our meal guests and our Director of Meal Services, Christina Moore. Prior to joining the staff of Shepherd's Table, Christina had experienced homelessness after serving in Iraq and developing a drug addiction. She started as a line cook and was promoted six years later to Director of Meal Services. Last year, she began mentoring a meal guest, a fellow military veteran who had who had undergone many of the same struggles. Christina took her under her wing, and within six months, she was out of the shelter, successfully employed, and in her own apartment.

To assist other meal guests in their journey toward self-sufficiency, we must holistically meet each person where they are. Funding this contract of \$208,000 with Interfaith Works will

bring necessary, adequately trained staff support to Progress Place.

I also support fully funding **two additional Mobile Crisis Teams, increasing shelter capacity, bringing more psychiatrists to shelters, and continuing overflow sheltering in motels**. These are essential line items that significantly impact the quality of life of people experiencing homelessness, and it is important to me that we continue funding them with the goal of permanently ending homelessness in our county. While we work on solutions that will affect people daily, we must also fund long-term solutions, such as **preserving and protecting affordable housing, fully funding the implementation of rent stabilization and eviction prevention and bringing more permanent supportive housing units online**.

Below are our line item priorities for FY25:

- Three Peer Support Specialists for Interfaith Works, \$207,950.
- Adding Two Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams, \$1.5 million.
- Increasing shelter capacity, \$2.9 million.
- Continue overflow motel shelter, \$2.6 million.
- Increase psychiatric care in shelters by \$2.5 million.
- Fund rental stabilization implementation.
- Prevention Team, \$841,966.
- Increase the Permanent Supportive Housing budget and increase Rental Assistance Programs.
- Continue to build and preserve affordable housing as homelessness prevention

Thank you for the time and opportunity to testify, and I implore you to prioritize the health, safety, and stability of our county's most vulnerable residents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Manny Hidalgo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Manny Hidalgo

Executive Director