

FY25 Operating Budget hearing April 8, 2024

Karen Leggett-Abouraya. [REDACTED]

“As far as we’ve come, the drive for equality is not over.”

Haben Girma made that comment during a Zoom class I recently taught for Politics and Prose featuring seven authors with disabilities and differences, including Haben, the deafblind woman who conquered Harvard Law. Seven authors demonstrated that intellectual prowess, skilled advocacy and creativity can flourish no matter the disability.

Montgomery County has a range of services and opportunities for people with differences, much of it on display yesterday at Montgomery College during the 15th year of Transition Work Group resource fairs. I’m speaking here today as a citizen and mother to ask Montgomery County to take more a few more steps toward equality.

First and foremost, we need to **raise the Developmental Disability supplement from 3 to 4.5%** to fund salaries for Direct Service Providers. This additional 1.5% is essential to accommodate new individuals entering the system and to keep pace with the increase in MC minimum wage. DSPs are the individuals who work at all hours to care for our citizens with disabilities, bringing them into the community, teaching them new skills, making them comfortable in new environments. These are not minimum wage jobs and should be recognized for the skills they require. We proclaim Direct Support Professional Week each year in Maryland, but let’s provide a proclamation with an impact – money in a paycheck.

Secondly, I am asking for **funding in the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Aging and Disability for staffing to support young people with disabilities through their transition year.** This is the year they leave high school, typically between 18 and 21 years old. The search for what comes next is exhausting, perhaps more so in a county with many options. So many people come to resource fairs saying they don’t even know what questions to ask or where to begin. This staff person could help improve collaboration with MCPS transition services and Coordinators of Community Services (CCS) agencies to maintain communication with families. We need to make sure no young person falls through the cracks because there wasn’t someone who could explain and help implement the choices.

Finally, I am requesting **full funding for the Department of Recreation so they can continue and expand their adaptive recreation programs.** I had the pleasure of watching a young man learn to kayak on Seneca Creek last summer. He was very nervous about even getting into the adapted kayak, but an hour later, I watched him paddle alone up the creek with a huge smile on his face. The confidence he gained in that simple but simply marvelous class will stay with him as he faces many other challenges in the community. Well paid DSPs, transition help and adaptive recreation – it all contributes to the drive for equality.