



TESTIMONY OF  
COURTNEY HALL, Interfaith Works CEO  
ON FY25 BUDGET  
April 8, 2024

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to discuss effective strategies to address the needs of our community through the FY25 budget. I am Courtney Hall, the CEO of Interfaith Works.

As you know, Interfaith Works serves 35,000 Montgomery County neighbors each year with programs that provide supportive housing, emergency shelter, essential needs like food, clothing and emergency rental assistance, and job placement services. Our programs emphasize prevention and diversion strategies that help people achieve stability so they are no longer in crisis.

We are grateful for the support of the Council and County Executive as we work as partners. We appreciate your willingness to listen and respond to the needs of our neighbors.

We are encouraged by some provisions in the County Executive's budget proposal. I want to highlight funding to create three Peer Support Specialist positions to address behavioral health needs at Progress Place in Silver Spring. Support like this is especially crucial as we see intensified behavioral health challenges presented by the community members we serve at Progress Place. We appreciate these much-needed positions and encourage you to support this funding.

We also appreciate the proposal's provisions to provide significant financial resources for shelters and supportive housing, and urge you to support this funding. We are encouraged by the budget proposal's stated emphasis on prevention strategies to address homelessness, a central concept at the heart of Interfaith Works programs as well.

That said – we know from experience that for prevention programs to succeed, they require sustained investment. And the time to invest is now.

## WHAT WE ARE SEEING IN OUR COMMUNITY

In the wake of COVID and the ending of special assistance programs, we are seeing concerning trends that indicate our neighbors continue to face serious challenges to their financial security.

I also want to highlight something that I think it is fair to say is among our biggest concerns – we must acknowledge there are **people who we are unable to serve** because we lack the staffing and the resources. As a practical matter, that means we either turn people away and divert them to other possible help, or we delay engaging with them until we have the capacity to help them. I don't know about you, but I believe that if we as a community are truly committed to helping people move forward, this cannot be acceptable.

IW's Connections is a good example. This program links low-income families and individuals with essential resources. This includes direct financial assistance to help prevent utility cutoffs and rental assistance to help prevent evictions and homelessness.

The demand is increasing. Households receiving financial assistance for rental assistance jumped from 218 in FY22 to 358 in FY23.

But because the program relies almost entirely on private donations – we run out of money because there is no reliable funding stream. Thus far in the fiscal year we have been able to provide 415 households with emergency financial assistance – that is the good news. But we had to turn away 300 families between September-December because we exhausted available funds.

We refer them to other possible sources of assistance, but they may not get the same timely help Interfaith Works provides because these programs have higher barriers to qualify. As time elapses, families find themselves in a deepening financial hole and sometimes they simply give up.

Here are a few data points that illustrate the increasing demand we saw from January - March 2024:

- 68% increase in calls for assistance;
- 22% increase in those receiving rental assistance; and
- 56% increase in those receiving utility assistance.

The need is not abating, and we need your help to meet it.

## VOCATIONAL SERVICES PROGRAM (VSP)

Over the past four years, we have helped 400 people secure jobs, collectively earning over \$10 million in annual initial wages. Not only do we help them find jobs but we help

them get job-ready, often assisting with adverse conditions like back rent, lost documentation, and other life issues.

But the demand for these services is more than our current team can meet right now.

Typically, we have a wait time of **6 to 8 weeks to engage with new clients**. This wait time means there are people **not moving forward** in their job searches, a delay that sometimes pushes them deeper into poverty and potential homelessness.

### **FOOD PANTRY (PART OF THE COUNTY FOOD HUB NETWORK)**

As I am sure the other HUBS are seeing, the need to address food insecurity in our community is not abating. We support the county's commitment to end childhood hunger, working in partnership with our community's food security network. The HUBs, which include the IW Food Pantry in Twinbrook, will be an important part of achieving that outcome. Our goal with this program is to do more and do better. Doing more means allowing families to shop twice a week instead of once. Doing better means having more flexibility to consistently provide the families we serve with more fresh produce and culturally appropriate foods.

My submitted testimony includes a detailed discussion of what our programs need to meet the needs of our community. Acknowledging the time limits today, I will highlight some of those priorities:

- Consider making the IW Clothing Center and the IW Connections programs part of the County's base budget. Many of you refer your constituents to these two essential programs. They provide essential core services to our neighbors but lack reliable sources of sustained funding.
- Provide strong support for the IW Vocational Services Program, which could help many more people find sustainable jobs to support themselves and their families if the program had more financial resources.
- Provide more support for the County's Food Hub network, including IW's Twinbrook pantry, to help achieve the elimination of childhood hunger in our community.

Thank you for your time and attention.

## FY25 Budget Needs – Interfaith Works

### WHAT DO WE NEED TO SERVE OUR COMMUNITY SUCCESSFULLY?

Prevention requires investment. We need to make these investments now.

- **The IW Clothing Center**, a vital community resource serving 7,000+ households annually by providing access to free clothing and home goods, is projected to fall more than \$93,500 short in FY25. This essential program is one that should be supported as part of the County's base budget, rather than relying on a patchwork of grants, which at times requires competing with our nonprofit partners for financial support.
- Funding to adequately support **IW's Connections program** – an important prevention program that helps people avoid eviction and utility cutoffs with emergency financial assistance. The program relies entirely on philanthropic support which comes and goes. This program needs \$513,000 to adequately respond to community needs. The County makes referrals to Connections but there is no County support. This is an essential program. Please consider making it part of the County's base budget to ensure consistent, reliable funding that does not leave families scrambling for help.
- Continued / increased funding for the **IW Food Pantry** – part of the County Food HUB network and an essential entry point for people who may need other services too. We are expanding to be able to serve more of our neighbors (for example, by adding more refrigeration). But we need more funding to ensure we can serve more people. We also need more flexibility in sourcing, particularly when it comes to fresh produce, and culturally appropriate food to serve our population effectively.
- Support for the Vocational Services Program to ensure we can serve more people in a timely fashion. The program is projected to experience a funding gap of more than \$450,000 in FY25.