

Good Afternoon/Evening,

My name is Dave Airozo. I am a Board Member of Shepherd's Table. As you know, for more than 40 years, Shepherd's Table has served the local community by providing healthy meals and other services to Montgomery County individuals, including those experiencing homelessness.

In conjunction with Interfaith Works, we provide a range of services at our Progress Place facility in downtown Silver Spring, including mental health care. A small line item in this year's Montgomery County budget aims to fund additional, badly needed mental health services through the addition of Peer Support Specialists for Progress Place.

Peer Support Specialists play a unique role in helping individuals address mental health, substance abuse, and other issues. They provide recovery services, as well as health and wellness self-management education, as directed by a certified Clinical Specialist. From a perspective based on his or her **personal experience** with mental illness and/or co-occurring disorders of mental illness and substance abuse, the Peer Support Specialist provides and coordinates a broad range of services for clients who have histories of **homelessness, psychiatric disability, substance abuse, criminal justice, and other trauma**. They creatively engage clients and build rapport in a non-traditional setting. They meet clients "where they are" and help them navigate a path to permanent housing.

In short, peer support specialist are people with the **lived experience** of homelessness, mental health challenges, and/or a substance use disorders. They support others experiencing similar challenges.

Funding three peer support specialists for Progress Place is a top priority for Shepheard's Table this year. The \$207,950 needed to fund these positions is a tiny fraction of the overall budget. The positive impact of this initiative far outweighs the cost.

In challenging budget times, it is important to focus on cost-effective spending that can have important, direct, and immediate positive results.

By ensuring that individuals get the services they need to address mental health and substance abuse challenges and by helping them navigate the system and secure permanent housing, the Peer Support Specialists tackle head-on two of the most difficult and persistent problems in our community. What's more, they can help the individuals facing these challenges address their issues in a positive way, rather than acting out and, potentially, harming themselves or others and finding themselves in the criminal justice system.

I know that public safety is top of mind for council members. As Council President Andrew Friedson said at a press conference just a few days ago, "Until every person and every business in our community feels safe and is safe...we have a lot of work to do."

Funding the Peer Support Specialists is a cost-effective way to help ensure that **everyone** in our community--including those facing life challenges--feel safe.

Thank You.