



## **Nourishing Bethesda before the Montgomery County Council April 9, 2024**

Good afternoon. My name is John F. Ross, and I am the Founder and Executive Director of Nourishing Bethesda, one of the fastest-growing, newest, and largest food pantries in the County. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. Thank you CM Andrew Friedson for getting us started and supporting us all the way along. Thank you CM Gabe Albornoz for supporting Nourishing Bethesda and your critical work in spearheading the County's initiative to end childhood hunger. And thanks so many CMs for coming out to visit our distribution facility. All of you have done so much to launch and sustain Nourishing Bethesda as it has grown into a powerful public-private partnership that delivers \$5 of value for each \$1 of support we receive from the County.

We understand that the FY 25 budget reflects a growing demand for services, and we are proud of our role in helping to meet the needs of some of our area's most vulnerable people.

Nourishing Bethesda was established in August of 2020 as a grab-and-go food distribution program at the height of the pandemic that took place each week in the parking lot of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad (BCCRS). With support from the County, foundations, local businesses, individual funders, and more than 600 volunteers, we have rapidly evolved now to an appointment model and reach nearly 5,000 individuals each month through a range of services. We address persistent pockets of poverty that often go unseen in an area known for affluence.

Over the past year, we have partnered with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services so that our clients can meet with one of the agency's Resource Navigator when they come to their BCCRS appointments. As Monica Rivera-Goldberg, who serves as the Program Manager of the Navigation Program for the DHHS under the Community Action Agency, explains, "When COVID hit, the county created a needs map to determine where rental assistance and other services were targeted. It was clear from this map and the work of other agencies that there was significant need in Bethesda, but a county site didn't exist," she noted. "We are excited to bring our case-management approach to the area and have a foothold in this community, which allows us to connect county residents with DHHS programs and other services. We know that coming into a DHHS office can be overwhelming or intimidating, so having a Navigator at NB's pick-up site means that residents can approach us in a space that feels familiar and safe to them."

Our initiatives now extend well beyond the weekly distributions to meet the needs of area residents, including direct delivery of food to clients at sites that include an emergency shelter to housing complexes for low-income seniors –Cordell Place, Lakeview Apartments, Nebel Street Shelter, and Waverly House.

Just last month, Nourishing Bethesda was awarded funding from the Office of Food Systems Resilience for the FY24 School-Based Food Assistance Grant Program to implement one of the recommendations in the Council's Strategic Plan to End Childhood Hunger. With these funds, we are providing Weekend Food Bags to students enrolled in the Free and Reduced Priced Meal (FARM) program at three elementary schools (Chevy Chase, Rosemary Hills, and Wood Acres) and one high school (BCC). This grant builds on the Weekend Food Bag program we launched just this past fall at Bethesda Elementary, an MCPS campus where nearly 21% of students are enrolled in FARM.

We implemented the first delivery in March and will continue through the end of the school year. We urge the Council to extend the Food Assistance Grant Program so that we can support these five schools for the 24/25 school year.

While Bethesda is thought to be universally wealthy, in our 47-square-mile service area, seven of the 19 MCPS elementary schools have a FARM enrollment of over 20%, with some reaching more than 33%. That's a lot of hungry children. Radically shifting population demographic changes, limited housing, and high cost of living, have created many pockets of need in our area.

We strongly encourage the Council to support a cost of living increase of 3 percent or more.

One of our organization's strengths is our ability to employ the resources of our community to reach our neighbors in need. Nourishing Bethesda also sees itself as encouraging community building through robust volunteering: More than 600 volunteers served more than 21,000 hours in 2023. Our volunteers come to us on their own or through such groups as Eagle Bank, Marriott International, the Bethesda Chamber of Commerce, Metro Rotary, and Walt Whitman High School's Whitman Serves, as well as other local religious congregations, civic groups, and businesses.

We continue to build out wraparound services and are either doing now or soon will be implementing programs in the areas of health screening, language skills, help with SNAP applications, and fiscal literacy and job programs.

One of our organization's unique strengths is to reach low-income wage workers who live elsewhere but work here. Bethesda is a magnet for these workers. Their long commute and work hours preclude them from accessing food pantries close to their house or apartment. Thus, we provide a distinctive, valuable service in the fight against County food insecurity.

We work in partnership with dozens of local businesses, other non-profits, civic groups, and faith communities to support many smaller initiatives, which include handing out thousands of children's books; celebrating senior birthdays with cupcakes baked and presented by high school students; distributing thousands of pieces of warm winter clothing; supplying the full fixings for Thanksgiving dinner; providing spring baskets around Easter; sponsor volunteer events, such as gleaning produce at local farms; convening round tables on food insecurity with area experts; sponsoring several high school internships each semester; host legislators, state and county staff members, and journalists to deepen their understanding of food insecurity issues.

We recover food otherwise destined for the landfill from Bethesda Bagels, Fresh Baguette, and the Gaithersburg-based catering firms Simply Fresh Events and Spilled Milk Catering— redirecting thousands of pounds of nourishment to our clients. Simply Fresh Events was honored in June 2023 at the Montgomery County Serves Awards as Volunteer Business of the Year for their partnership with us. Overall, our partners donated 36,000 pounds of recovered food during the 2023 calendar year. We also received 116,000 pounds of in-kind food donations that year.

Later in 2024 we will launch our third configuration, the Choice Pantry. This is considered the gold standard of food pantries in which clients can select the food they want in a grocery-store-like environment. In this model, food as medicine – the concept that recognizes that access to high-quality nourishments is essential for well-being – as well as giving the client maximum agency and dignity will inform our efforts to customize offerings to meet medical needs, ethnic food preferences, and specific diets.

Nourishing Bethesda is one of many nonprofits that are important partners in helping Montgomery County become an even better place to live. I hope the Council will continue to invest in the lives of all of its residents and support additional inflationary increases and funding that supports nonprofits in the county.

Thank you for all of your work on behalf of all of the County's residents.