

April 9, 2024
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MONTGOMERY COUNTY FY25 OPERATING BUDGET TESTIMONY

on behalf of Jews United for Justice

Dear members of the Montgomery County Council,

My name is Mara Greengrass. I live in Rockville, in District 6, and I'm the mother of an MCPS graduate and a current high school freshman (go, Northwood Gladiators!). I'm also a volunteer leader with Jews United for Justice, which organizes over 2,000 Jews and allies across Montgomery County to advance social and economic justice and racial equity in our local communities. In what's left of my free time, I'm a web consultant for a national non-profit, a member of Congregation Beth El in Bethesda, and a board member of the Randolph Civic Foundation.

In Jewish tradition, we are taught that no community is complete without ten key features designed to meet its residents' core spiritual and physical needs. Programs that address the needs for health, housing, food access, economic security, education, and the general wellbeing of County residents and workers must be protected in this year's budget.

Invest in Education

We can't balance the budget at the expense of students and educators. We join our partners, including MCEA, SEIU Local 500, the Decriminalize Montgomery County Campaign, Racial Justice NOW!, and Young People for Progress, in urging you to:

- 1. Fully fund MCPS's FY25 budget recommendations to honor union contracts and meet student needs**
- 2. Add funding to the MCPS FY25 budget to maintain FY24 levels for Restorative Justice Specialists and stipends for Restorative Justice Coaches so we can continue to build and strengthen the program**

Fully funding the MCPS budget is urgent for so many reasons. For me, the reason is my son who is a freshman at Northwood High School. He has an IEP and a whole lot of struggles. His diagnoses are his own to disclose, but I can say that, despite being smart as can be, he struggles with the demands of the school day, the social aspects of school, and the work required, especially if it involves writing. (Reading? No problem! His teachers report that he's always reading, even when he's not supposed to be.) Special Education staff have good intentions and good ideas, but they lack resources to provide what kids need. Since elementary school, this has meant my son getting farther behind in skills development, despite our best efforts. JUFJ urges you to fully fund MCPS because all children deserve the best possible education.

Invest in Programs that are Data-Proven to Keep Us Safe

The Jewish sage Hillel instructs us not to separate ourselves from the community, and this is especially important when it comes to public safety. Our safety is tied to the safety of our neighbors. Therefore we join our partners, including the Montgomery County Decrim Campaign, Racial Justice NOW!, Silver Spring Justice Coalition, Shepherd's Table, and Young People for Progress in urging you to:

- 1. Support the proposed \$1.5 million funding for 7 Mobile Crisis Outreach Teams units**
- 2. Transition away from the Community Engagement Officer program and invest in more robust mental health and restorative justice supports for students**

As a parent of a child with an IEP, I strongly support mental health crisis response that is led by mental health professionals, rather than law enforcement. And we call on the Council to invest in data-proven student supports, which means reversing the planned reduction in funding for restorative justice.

Invest in Eviction Prevention and Support for our Unhoused Neighbors

Our sacred texts recognize that having safe, stable housing is key to a healthy society, and we know that it is key to reducing racial inequities. Therefore we join our partners, including CASA, Everyday Canvassing, MoCo DSA, MORE Network, Shepherd's Table, in urging you to:

- 1. Support the proposed funding to implement rent stabilization**
- 2. Support the proposed funding for 3 peer specialists at Progress Place**
- 3. Support the proposed funding to increase homeless shelter capacity**
- 4. Increase funding for eviction prevention and emergency rent stabilization**

We have failed to provide the proactive infrastructure needed to prevent renters in Montgomery County from losing their homes. Our homeless shelters are over capacity. So much so that the only place a friend of mine could find to sleep is in their car, outside Progress Place, which doesn't have the resources to permanently house them. We must do better.

We specifically want to highlight item #4 – we are deeply concerned that there are insufficient funds to replace the disappearing federal funding for Emergency Rental Assistance (ERAP). We urge the Council to significantly increase the funding for the new Eviction Prevention Team, currently allocated at \$841,966. This team, whose members will come from the staff that gave out ERAP funds, is being reduced from 28 to 8 staff members. We urge the Council to increase funding for staffing and to provide dedicated funds to directly assist families at risk of eviction.

Our budgets are moral documents that reflect our County's values, and we urge the Council to pass a budget that reflects the values of equity, diversity, and justice for everyone in our County. Thank you.