

Written Testimony for the 04/08/2024 Operating Budget Hearing
By Kellie Butsack ~ Story Tapestries, Inc.

Dear Montgomery County Councilmembers,

Thank you for your support of the arts and humanities in Montgomery County. On behalf of Story Tapestries, we express our deep appreciation for the county's support as we continue to navigate the post-pandemic recovery.

Story Tapestries is an arts service organization that meets mental health, education, workforce development, digital equity and economic stability objectives through the use of the arts as a tool to support personal and community development for individuals of all ages. Since becoming a 501c3 nonprofit in 2010, our programs and services have impacted over 3 million lives through performances, workshops and professional development programs.

- We believe in a collaborative project process to provide sustainable community growth and development. The overarching goal of our work is to design a blueprint for programming that integrates a network of partners and individuals who collectively support the growth of the entire community and foster quality programs capable of addressing the changing needs of the community.
- Our economic and workforce development programs are vital to creating the next generation of Montgomery Co leaders, to addressing the inequities of our educational and employment systems, and to honoring the voices of those individuals who feel marginalized. Our innovative programming elevates our partnerships with other organizations, such as MCCH and LAYC, and serves an important role in providing those leadership experiences that bring youth and elders together to build and appreciate the value of their stories, to learn the skills of being leaders, to develop conflict resolution techniques that can transform the future of Montgomery County.
- Through WorkSource Montgomery's Community Workforce Network funding in FY24, we were able to provide workforce development programming to over 500 adults in Montgomery County, both parents and professionals, nearly 150 of whom are Early Childhood Educators who earned certificates for 3 clock hours of continuing education through courses we offer that are accredited through the MD State Dept of Education. Such programming not only ensures job security for those educators but also empowers them to obtain personal career and economic advancement.
- In the past year, Story Tapestries added a new full-time Early Childhood Program Director to our team, focused not only on increasing academic outcomes for younger Pre-K children, but more importantly, supporting early childhood educators in their own professional development, job security and career advancement. Our early childhood education teachers need support to earn a living wage and have growth opportunities in their field.
- We also provided, and continue to provide, training, coaching and mentorship for aspiring teaching artists to increase their skill set, obtain employment and earn a living wage.
- **StoryTapestries Budget Request:**

- We request a \$200,000 budget allocation for Story Tapestries to provide continued capacity building support. Through our CHART program, we will conduct a County-wide needs assessment plus provide training to a network of 20 master teaching artists; training is to be led by a professional psychologist in collaboration with arts integration experts to equip teaching artists to be able to use the tools of the arts as a mental health support; those 20 MTAs will then incorporate these strategies into every program they lead across the county
 - CHART, which stands for “Creative, Healthy ARTs experiences” is an innovative, important response to the mental health crisis and a unique approach to supporting mental health and wellness. Expert teaching artists are trained in trauma-response practices to lead individuals through songwriting, poetry, dance, and visual arts experiences to help them explore their emotions and perceptions, and to discover new perspectives. Youth and adults learn valuable skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and social awareness – setting the groundwork for a stronger community built on authentic relationships that are critical to mental health and wellness. The Story Tapestries team works directly with guidance counselors, social workers and certified health professionals to utilize an arts approach to support community-wide culture, practices and policies that support social-emotional development and ensure that everyone across our community has access to mental health tools. Such work is being done with MCCH, LAYC and senior communities, and the additional funding allocation of \$200,000 will enable us to scale-up the program County-wide.
 - The lack of social interaction and emotional support during the pandemic has caused social regression and unregulated emotions for so many. These challenges are especially prevalent for our most underserved populations - indigenous and individuals of color, English language learners, individuals with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ community. Developing Social-Emotional Learning competencies at every age impacts both prevention and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders as well as academic and job performance, economic stability and the ability to succeed.
- **AHCMC Budget Allocation:**
 - The Arts and Humanities support positive mental health, public safety, tourism, quality of life, workforce development, and economic growth throughout Montgomery County. The AHCMC is a key funder and partner of our work as an arts and humanities organization, whose funding transcends cultural impact to also support academic, workforce and economic outcomes across the county. We ask that you please allocate \$700,000 in additional funds for regranting to AHCMC, above the County Executive’s FY 2025 proposal, which will address a projected \$900,000 increase in grants demand over FY 2024 and ensure an equitable recovery for our diverse cultural sector and the creative workforce it employs in Montgomery County.

- We ask your support of **Council President Friedson's J.O.B.S. initiative** to create new jobs, invest in Equity Focus Areas and foster innovation and creativity in workforce development. One of the most significant barriers to entering today's workforce is the knowledge and understanding of how to present yourself confidently and professionally in an increasingly digital environment. A polished LinkedIn profile and headshot, combined with the confidence and fluency to present yourself and tell your story, can make all the difference on the journey to a job placement or a higher education opportunity. Our Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program combines practical and technical skills, access to equipment, and the critical soft skills that individuals need to put their best foot forward. Through this program, we've seen first-hand how important it is to combine support for hard and soft skills. Individuals facing trauma and life challenges need to also build their confidence and belief in themselves in order to be successful.
- A testament to our request for budget allocations for Story Tapestries, AHCMC and the greater good of our community at large, I would like to end with a quote from our partners at MCCH, "We are extremely grateful to ST for providing unique, impactful, trauma-informed experiences that help children, parents and adults impacted by the experiences of homelessness and the pandemic to develop social and emotional strengths and feel strong and capable. The impact of ST was like introducing water to a desert - growth and blooming happened in unexpectedly beautiful and necessary ways."

Please support the arts and humanities. The arts make the process of growth and learning one of openness and encouragement - free of intimidation or shame - giving each person the opportunity to reach their own highest potential. An increased investment in the cultural sector is a proven investment in our economic recovery and the future prosperity of all residents across Montgomery County.

THANK YOU.

Kellie Butsack
Story Tapestries, Inc.