



Testimony Before the Montgomery County Council April 9, 2024

I am Link Hoewing from the Fair Access Committee for the Western County. We are a committee of the Town of Poolesville created by citizens and commissioners to **push for equity in the provision of county and state services and facilities for our area.**

I am here today to urge your support for **a \$230,000 line item in the HHS budget to fund WUMCO's work to offer health care services, including dental and primary care, to Western County residents** who either can't afford these services or can't easily get to them because they are often 10 or more miles away.

Hidden need, distance, isolation, and lack of population are the major challenges we face in ensuring equitable access to county services, facilities, and programs. This is especially true regarding healthcare where we have **only two primary care doctors to serve the needs of 12,000 or so people** and no specialists of any kind.

We founded Fair Access around the belief that county policy is **fundamentally grounded in a commitment to equity**. Our job is to show the inequities that exist and push to redress them. The lack of routine and convenient health care and dental services for so many is a major one of those inequities.

While we need county support to help improve the lives of our residents in the Western County, our community does all it can to help find solutions and identify data that will help address problems. We don't simply press and push to get funding and then leave it to others. **We try to develop solutions on our own and prove in approaches that can meet the unique needs of our residents.**

Our local charitable services organization WUMCO has long had a volunteer driver program to help needy residents get to medical appointments they have. The public transit services in our area are extremely limited and do not have routes that go to where most of the medical specialists and doctors are located down-county.

In managing the driver program as well as its food programs, WUMCO became more and more aware of the wide range of medical and dental needs that exists

among a wide array of its clients, especially older people living in isolation and alone, and Hispanic families often living in the Ag Reserve on horse farms and other agricultural establishments. Fair Access and WUMCO pushed the county to help find ways to serve these residents, but we often heard that the county was not aware of these needs and could not justify funding.

Several years ago, **WUMCO set out to prove the need is real** by procuring a grant from the Healthcare Initiative Foundation to begin operating clinics. It also hired a health care coordinator who reached out to health care providers such as Care for Your Health to offer a variety of medical services to needy residents. WUMCO worked to get mobile dental services for residents who often have not seen a dentist for years. You have already heard from Melissa Widenhofer who runs the WUMCO program about the astounding results of WUMCO's work.

When the county rebuffed us and said they did not have evidence of the need, we got to work to show it exists. WUMCO has also demonstrated how it can adapt and expand its portfolio to offer services it knows its clients need and can't get from the county.

Our area is unique in many ways as you know. Unlike many areas in the county, we have only one charitable services organization that can operate the health care programs our needy residents must have. WUMCO has shown it can do the job. It has broad community support and has a deep knowledge of both the need and its clients. **The most practical and effective way to address these serious and unmet health care needs is to approve this grant to WUMCO and make it a standing line item in future budgets.**

By funding this grant to WUMCO, you will be taking an important step in addressing a major inequity - helping the needy in our area get access to needed health care services that are today unavailable or too expensive for many of them. Thank you.