

My name is Barbara Oke, and together with Victor Oke, we are the owners of Care Positive. We are proud members of The Arc Montgomery Respite Consortium, providing respite services to caregivers supporting seniors and children and adults with disabilities throughout Montgomery County.

We appear before you today to raise **serious and immediate concerns** regarding two critical aspects of the proposed FY27 budget: the proposed limitation of respite services to 120 hours per year and the continued respite reimbursement rate of \$33 per hour.

Respite care is not supplemental or discretionary support—it is an essential service that sustains caregivers and prevents crises. Limiting families to 120 hours annually represents a significant reduction in support and will undermine the core purpose of the respite program. Caregivers managing complex and ongoing responsibilities depend on predictable, consistent relief. A rigid annual cap will increase caregiver stress, accelerate burnout, and heighten the risk of health deterioration and emergency placements—outcomes that ultimately drive higher costs for the County’s healthcare and human services systems.

Equally concerning is the continued misalignment between the reimbursement rate and the actual cost of delivering services. Montgomery County’s minimum wage increases—paired with rising costs related to recruitment, training, insurance, background checks, compliance, and administrative oversight—have fundamentally changed the economics of service delivery. At the current rate of \$33 per hour, providers are increasingly forced to absorb losses or make operational decisions that compromise workforce stability and service availability.

Respite providers remain committed to serving the County’s most vulnerable residents. However, without reimbursement that reflects current economic realities and without sufficient authorized service hours, provider capacity will continue to erode. This trend places families at risk and threatens the long-term viability of the respite program itself.

For these reasons, we respectfully but urgently request the following actions:

- An adjustment of the respite reimbursement rate to \$36 per hour, and
- Reconsideration of the proposed 120-hour annual cap in favor of 144 hours per year, thereby allowing families to access a consistent and reasonable level of support—12 hours per month—across the fiscal year.

These requests represent modest, targeted investments that will stabilize the provider network, support fair wages for direct care workers, and preserve access to services that prevent caregiver exhaustion, avoid costly system interventions, and promote long-term caregiving success.

We urge the Council to consider the downstream consequences of these policy decisions and to act decisively to protect the integrity and effectiveness of Montgomery County’s respite care system.

Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your continued commitment to the individuals, families, and caregivers who depend on these essential services.