

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Council,

My name is Alexzander Baetsen, and I am the co-chair of MoCo Pride Prom, the longest-running program of the non-profit organization MoCo Pride Family, Inc. MoCo Pride Prom hosts an annual pride prom event that creates an affirming space for LGBTQ+ students and their allies to proudly attend prom—dressing however they are most comfortable, and dancing without fear with whomever they choose.

Growing up as a queer trans-masculine person, I frequently felt out of place at traditional school events. At my first high school dance, I was aware of all of the eyes staring at me as I wore a suit far too large on me, binding my chest with close-cropped hair and dancing with my non-binary partner. It was my first time outwardly expressing myself as masculine in a formal setting, and I felt incredibly self-conscious; like I had a huge target on my back that identified me as queer, as an ‘other.’ In 2019, I attended my first MoCo Pride Prom event. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by other LGBTQ+ youth. It was such an affirming and empowering experience to be in a room filled with other people who defied gender norms, wore extravagant and outlandish outfits, and danced with partners of all genders—just like I did. I felt a profound sense of community, belonging, and joy that I had never experienced before.

Now that I have been co-chair of MoCo Pride Prom for two years, I have also heard directly from other attendees about what this event means to them. Last year, we collected numerous handwritten notes from students expressing heartfelt messages that remind us why our mission to create a safe space that welcomes and celebrates queer youth is so important. Some of our favorites include: *“Pride prom is a place where I don’t have to worry if being happy upsets other people, where I can meet fun people without fear, and truly let loose for the first time ever.”* / *“This is visibility. I don’t have many queer people in my life and this just means so much.”* / *“Pride Prom was the first pride event I went to and it really helped me realize who I am.”* / *“Freedom to be myself.”* / *“Pride prom gives me hope.”*

Despite the great diversity and progressive values of our county, too many LGBTQ+ youth continue to lack affirming, safe spaces where they feel free to be their authentic selves. Further, many face the added risk of harassment, discrimination, and bullying solely based on their identities. Programs and services such as MoCo Pride Prom are essential for the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth in our community, and the demand for such initiatives continues to grow. Given the clear value of these programs and services for LGBTQ+ youth, I urge you to fund the Montgomery County Pride Family, MoCo Pride Center, Inc., at a minimum of \$1 million in the FY27 base budget. With your support, the Pride Center can continue expanding access to critical programming and services that uplift LGBTQ+ youth, adults, and allies within the Montgomery County Community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Alexzander Baetsen

Co-Chair, MoCo Pride Prom