

Dear Council President Fani-Gonzalez, Vice President Balcombe, and Council Members,

My name is Akanksha Sinha. I am a Silver Spring resident, a non-binary Indian immigrant, and a member of the MoCo Food Justice Coalition. I am also the Advocacy Manager at Manna Food Center, although I am speaking on my own behalf. Today, I am asking for expanded trauma-informed food access for vulnerable communities in our county.

When I was a 16-year-old growing up in India, I was raped by a childhood friend. Many who are raped as minors become repeat survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. After coming to Georgetown University, where rape culture and racism were pervasive, I too became a multiple-time rape survivor.

Studies have confirmed what I knew as true from my own experience – rape survivorship often leads to food insecurity. I have spent hundreds of dollars of work-study earnings on complex PTSD medication that my insurance wouldn't cover, which left little to no funds for food.

My PTSD has been a connector to other vulnerable members of our community. Within our Food Justice Coalition, many of our members are formerly incarcerated persons who are unable to access employment, housing and food. One FJC member and I bonded over his PTSD from being a veteran who witnessed the gruesome deaths of innocent civilians abroad, and his own troopmates. He was eventually incarcerated due to his PTSD-driven response against the perpetrator of rape upon his underage niece. Our stories are those of surviving systemic failures, and painful gender-based violence.

PTSD doesn't just live in the brain. It disrupts our biological processes. Symptoms like "hypervigilance" cause the body to be constantly activated. PTSD and chronic pain are comorbidities. Those with PTSD have higher risks of heart diseases, diabetes, cancer, autoimmune diseases, and more. PTSD leads to unimaginable biological stress on the body – making daily life including working and feeding oneself extremely difficult.

The intersection between survivorship and incarceration is particularly important. Besides the fact that incarceration itself is significant trauma, studies show that up to 95% of women incarcerated in the US have experienced domestic or sexual violence at some point in their lifetime. Experts refer to this as the "abuse-to-prison" pipeline. Moreover, every year, roughly 200,000 adults and children are sexually abused behind bars. Over 3,700 Marylanders allege systemic child sexual abuse at the hands of the staff of Maryland's own juvenile justice system.

Survivors like myself and formerly incarcerated residents of this county, deserve access to housing, food, and trauma-informed care. I urge the council to invest in trauma-informed programming for these groups within the Office of Food Systems Resilience's community gardening program, especially through the protection of the \$150,000 Food Systems Education Enhancement. The county must supplement the OFSR budget by \$3.5 million to reflect continually increasing levels of need, and to ensure that there are NO reductions across ANY OFSR programs. These investments would allow impacted community

members to access therapeutic gardening, build self-sufficiency, and ensure positive contribution to our communities.

However, it is equally important that we divest from continuing these cycles of trauma. Montgomery County annually dedicates over \$45,000 of County towards unleashing systemic sexual and carceral violence against Palestinians. I recently found out that my taxpayer money goes to the Maryland Israel Development Center. As a witness to Israel's forced starvation and massacres of civilians in Gaza, and witness to non-citizen survivors of domestic violence and trafficking being removed from SNAP eligibility, I understand that the systems removing necessary food and food systems from the hands of victims of occupation, exploitation, and sexual violence are fundamentally connected.

In funding the Maryland Israel Development Center, this County directly funds businesses such as ELTA Systems and RAFAEL that are part of the Israeli military. Roboteam was brought right here to Montgomery County and makes military drones, while boasting that their products are 'battle-tested'. An owner of one such cybersecurity firm brought in by the MIDC threatened anti-genocide protestors in Rockville last year, stating with amplified sound, "We'll take your heads. We'll take your life."

I found my way to food justice work through organizing against colonialism and genocide. I have been inspired to work towards strengthening Maryland's local food system by my best friend, a Palestinian American working on food justice in Palestine. She preserved heirloom seeds, protects farmers' rights, and safeguards local food systems. Under apartheid conditions, Israeli settlers and armed forces light entire villages on fire, conduct massive raids upon civilian areas, and evict communities from their land. In Israeli prisons where Palestinian prisoners are held without trial or cause, routine rape and gang-rape has been documented over decades. Over the last few years, my friend and I have caught up between photos of her sweeping bullets from homes turned to rubble. Then, at the start of 2026, my friend's office was raided, her colleagues arbitrarily detained, and two precious seed banks destroyed. The entire agricultural organization has been forced to close.

Companies brought to Maryland by the MIDC are integral parts of the apparatus used to oppress and destroy Palestinian life, food systems, farmers, and every aspect of society. They make millions, or sometimes billions, of dollars in revenue, and do not need nor deserve Montgomery County taxpayer money. Please permanently divest from the MIDC, and dedicate those funds permanently to food access programming for this county's own community members who are survivors of sexual violence, members with PTSD, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

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#### Important Facts and Stats

- Sexual abuse and violence continue to plague detention facilities in the United States. Every year, roughly 200,000 adults and children are sexually abused behind

bars

(Beck,

2013).

<https://mcasa.org/newsletters/article/survivor-safety-the-prison-rape-elimination-act>

- 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted).
- The majority of sexual assault victims experience their first assault before their eighteenth birthday.
- Rape is the most under-reported crime; 63% of sexual assaults are not reported to police. Only 12% of child sexual abuse is reported to the authorities.

- Source:

<https://web.doane.edu/offices-services/student-services/cape-project/the-facts>

- Nearly 1 in 2 (47%) of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people have experienced sexual assault or rape in their lifetime.
- Transgender people of color experience sexual violence at even higher rates.
- People with disabilities experience sexual violence at a rate 3 times as often as abled people.

- Source:

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/familyservices/domestic-sexual-violence/sexual-violence/statistics#:~:text=SAFETY%20ALERT%20%E2%80%93%20If%20you%20are,danger%2C%20call%20or%20text%20911.&text=Every%2068%20seconds%2C%20someone%20in,completed%20rape%20in%20their%20lifetime.>