

Between Two Worlds: Grief, Asylum, and the Call for Culturally Competent Services

Good afternoon, Councilmember. My name is **Demeke Shiferaw**. I serve as a community volunteer with the Ethiopian Community Center, my local Sunday church service, and the TESS Community Action Center, and I am a proud resident of Montgomery County. I am here today to respectfully ask for your leadership in strengthening our county's investment in culturally responsive mental health services—particularly providers who speak the languages and understand the lived experiences of asylum seekers.

Montgomery County is home to the largest immigrant population in Maryland, including more than 149,000 non-citizens. The Ethiopian community is one of the most established immigrant groups in the county, especially in Silver Spring and Takoma Park. Within this community, an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 individuals are asylum seekers or come from conflict-affected regions. Yet our mental health system does not have enough culturally and linguistically competent providers to meet their needs. The result is long delays, miscommunication, and untreated trauma that ultimately becomes more costly for the county.

My own experience reflects this gap. While navigating the long and uncertain asylum process, my mother became gravely ill in Ethiopia. Because of conflict and my pending case, I could not return to care for her. She passed away without receiving the treatment she needed. That grief—and the isolation of legal limbo—is something many asylum seekers in this county understand too well.

Culturally responsive providers are not a luxury. They are essential to early intervention, crisis prevention, and long-term community stability. Investing in this workforce improves public health outcomes, reduces emergency interventions, and strengthens economic participation among immigrant families.

When I conducted a community survey and compared my experience with others, it became clear that my story is not an exception—it is part of a broader pattern. A 2024 pilot study of 386 Ethiopian residents in the DMV area found:

- **45.3%** experience insufficient sleep, a major health risk factor

- **75.5%** have never received a mental health exam
- **35.9%** show signs of depression—nearly double the national rate

These numbers reflect what I see every day: immigrants carrying homesickness, trauma, delayed medical care, and fear of seeking help because of cultural differences or immigration concerns.

After nearly eleven years in Montgomery County, I feel at home in this diverse and welcoming community. I have never had personal issues with the United States—especially Maryland and Montgomery County. But I have seen how many immigrant families struggle to access affordable healthcare, mental health support, and legal services. Many in the community avoid seeking help until it is too late because they are overwhelmed, uninformed, or afraid.

My experience shows why expanding culturally competent services is essential. When immigrants feel safe, understood, and supported, they seek care earlier, protect their families, and rebuild their lives. These services are not optional—they are lifelines.

Conclusion

Strategic investment in stable housing, trauma-responsive support, and culturally grounded mental health and substance use services will strengthen the Ethiopian community and contribute to a healthier, more economically resilient Montgomery County and DMV region.

Your support would send a powerful message: that Montgomery County sees asylum seekers as neighbors, contributors, and valued members of our community.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to equity.