

County Council Budget Testimony – FY27

Madam President and Members of the County Council,

My name is Novlette Williamson, and I am a resident of Montgomery County. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

I am here to ask the County to invest in early mental-health intervention, whole-person screening, and coordinated community referrals so residents do not have to reach crisis before receiving help.

Life happens. But how people respond to life's challenges depends heavily on their support system. For many of us, especially during periods of illness, disability, financial hardship, or housing instability, that support system is not family or friends. It is our healthcare providers.

Providers often see the early signs. But what is not always visible is the full picture emotional strain, instability, or lack of support behind a composed or "strong" appearance.

Research shows that many women, particularly Black women, are often expected to remain strong even under significant stress. This can lead to delayed care, especially when distress is not immediately visible. Combined with ongoing health disparities, this contributes to many individuals in marginalized communities receiving care too late. This is why early screening and whole-person care are critical.

I know this firsthand.

After experiencing medical, financial, and housing instability, I found support through a community organization that helped me begin rebuilding. I am deeply grateful for that support.

But that connection did not come through my healthcare providers, and it could have.

That health care gap matters.

There is a uniquely critical opportunity for healthcare providers, as trusted points of contact, to connect patients earlier to community-based resources before situations escalate into emergency conditions, mental-health breakdowns, or loss of stability.

This is not just a local concern. There is growing recognition, even at the federal level, that reducing barriers and improving care coordination is essential. CMS is working to reduce barriers. I am showing what happens when those barriers are not removed in time. My lived experience reflects why that work is so important.

These national conversations reinforce the same principle I am advocating locally: that crisis prevention and early support are more effective and more humane than crisis-driven response.

I respectfully request that the County increase funding in the FY27 budget for:

- Early mental-health and whole-person screening
- Caregiver education and support
- Cultural competency and communication training for healthcare providers

- Coordinated referral systems that connect patients to housing support, financial assistance, disability resources, and community-based organizations

Strengthening early intervention and prevention-based services not only reduces stress and long-term public health costs, but also improves outcomes for vulnerable communities and families, protects caregivers from burnout, and ensures that residents do not suffer in silence before receiving help due to gaps in provider training, competencies, and emotional-intelligence skills.

Regardless of how instability occurs, people need care and they need it early.

No one should have to fall apart to receive the care they need.

Thank you.

Novlette M. Willimson